

**‘Where Gone?’  
and Other Poems,  
Fictions and Memories**

**Cedric Watts**

PublishNation

Copyright © Cedric Watts, 2017.  
Second (revised) edition © Cedric Watts, 2017.  
Third (enlarged) edition © Cedric Watts, 2018.  
Fourth (enlarged and corrected) edition © Cedric Watts, 2019.

ISBN: 978-0-244-64648-6

PublishNation.

**To**  
**Marlene Wallace**  
**and**  
**Bill Thom**

## **Contents**

1. Introduction and Acknowledgements	7
--------------------------------------	---

2. 'Where Gone?'	9
3. Philosophical Investigations	10
4. Ebb	11
5. 'Our Love's a Tree'	12
6. My Simple but Difficult Son	13
7. Target for Tonight	14
8. Garden Town	16
9. War-Time Silver	18
10. Axes	19
11. Missing the Bus	21
12. Bop...Prohibited!	22
13. Is That <i>It</i> ?	24
14. Nepotism	25
15. Choice and Chance	27
16. Off the Hook	28
17. The Cut Foot and the Sensitive Conscience	30
18. Reticence	34
19. Charles Baudelaire: 'Albatross'	35
20. Charles Baudelaire: 'On "Tasso in Prison"'	36
21. Charles Baudelaire: 'Amid her undulating nacreous robes'	37
22. Charles Baudelaire: 'Entirety'	38
23. Charles Baudelaire: 'Cloudy Sky'	39
24. Charles Baudelaire: 'Music (Beethoven)'	40

25. Refugee from Limbo	41
26. Ann and Ron Help the Unlucky Unicorn	43
27. Roland Barthes's Resurrection of the Author	48
28. <i>The Progress of Dionysus</i> : A Novella	59
29. <i>'It's a Wrap!'</i> : A Novella	96
30. Angry Elegy for Dylan Thomas	126
31. Charles Baudelaire: 'Autumn Song'	128
32. Iago's Motive	129
33. Romantic Slaves	131
34. Charles Baudelaire: 'Omens'	133

# 1

## Introduction and Acknowledgements

This volume gathers some poems, fictional items and recollections which were written between 1966 and 2018.

‘Where Gone?’, about Linda Watts (1964-85), was first published in *Twenty-Seven Poems*, ed. Judith Woolf (Brighton: University of Sussex, 1966), p. 31. ‘Where Gone?’ and ‘Philosophical Investigations’ were published in *Poetry Review*, number 59 (Spring 1968), p. 33; and the editor actually paid me *two guineas* for them: that’s how long ago it was. ‘Ebb’ and ‘Our Love’s a Tree’ were in *Dis* magazine, second issue (1968), p. 7. ‘My Simple but Difficult Son’ appeared in *Expression*, number 8 (1968), p. 9. A longer version of ‘Off the Hook’ was published in *The Creative Writing Olympics Anthology* (Brighton: University of Brighton, 2010), pp. 70-71. ‘War-Time Silver’, ‘Reticence’, ‘Bop... Prohibited!’, ‘Is That It?’ and ‘Missing the Bus’ are hitherto unpublished, but some of them were declaimed at various ‘QuickFictions’ sessions (no piece longer than 300 words) organised in Brighton by Professor Nicholas Royle. ‘Nepotism’ (2014) and ‘Choice and Chance’ (2014) are unpublished, though they have (with appropriate irony) featured in a lecture for the Joseph Conrad Society (U.K.). ‘The Cut Foot and the Sensitive Conscience’ is part of *Final Exam: A Novel* by ‘Peter Green’ (London: PublishNation, 2013). The translation of Baudelaire’s ‘Albatross’ was first published in *Final Exam*, p. 178. The translations of Baudelaire’s ‘Sur “Le Tasse en prison” d’Eugène Delacroix’ (2014), ‘Avec ses vêtements ondoyants et nacrés’ (2017), ‘Tout entière’ (2017), ‘Ciel brouillé’ (2017), and ‘La Musique: Beethoven’ (2017), here respectively entitled ‘On “Tasso in Prison” (painted by Eugène Delacroix)’, ‘Amid her undulating nacreous robes’, ‘Entirety’, ‘Cloudy Sky’, and ‘Music (Beethoven)’, are unpublished, as is ‘Refugee from Limbo’ (2014). ‘Target for Tonight’, ‘Garden Town’ and ‘Axes’ appeared (with small differences) in my *A String of Sausages* in 2016. ‘Angry Elegy for Dylan Thomas’, 207, is another late piece, subsequently published on the website ‘The High Window’. ‘Ann and Ron Help the Unlucky Unicorn’ was first published in *Fantastic Finds of Ann and Ron: Stories in Verse for Bright Youngsters*, illustrated by Amanda Davidson (London: PublishNation, 2014). The ‘enlarged edition’ of

this book adds these unpublished poems: translations of Baudelaire's 'Chant d'automne' ('Autumn Song') and 'Le Guignon' ('Omens'); 'Iago's Motive'; and 'Romantic Slaves'. The *novelle* or short novels *The Progress of Dionysus* and 'It's a Wrap!' are hitherto unpublished.

The presence of 'Roland Barthes's Resurrection of the Author and Vindication of Biography' in this collection perhaps deserves some explanation. Its author, 'J. C. Carlier', was originally Joseph Conrad's character Carlier in the tale 'An Outpost of Progress': the initials 'J. C.' stand for 'Joseph Conrad's'. There Carlier expressed his critical opinion of works by various well-known writers. Sadly, he was slain. It seemed logical that a rebuttal of the common interpretation of the 'Death of the Author' theory should be written by a dead character. Note that the footnote 'translated by C. T. Watts' is truthfully keyed to the name 'Carlier', not to the essay as a whole. This piece was originally published in *Critical Quarterly* 29:4 (Autumn 2000), pp. 386-93; subsequently it appeared (in modified form and with the title "'The Death of the Author": Roland Barthes's Unappreciated Satire') in *The Humanities* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong), Vol. 1 (2001), pp 81-90; and (with the original title) it was reprinted as Item 49 of *Roland Barthes*, ed. Mike and Nicholas Gane (London: Sage, 2004), Vol. 3, pp. 115-22. As the professed author is a deceased literary character, it would show disrespect to the dead to deny him his claim to the essay and also to deny that essay the consequent accolade of fiction.

This modest collection is dedicated to Marlene Wallace, who, for me in 1954-8, was pretty and loving, and to Bill Thom, who, to me in 1955-8, was generous and kind.

I hope that the ensuing material will offer the reader mild entertainment.

## 2

### 'Where Gone?'



Two days ago  
    my infant daughter  
        aged 17 months  
mountaineered behind me in the chair  
    where I sat.  
Laying her giggling hands on my padded shoulders  
    she said  
        ‘Where gone? Where gone?’

Yesterday  
    she walked  
        unsteadily  
into my candle-lit room  
        as though in sleep or drink  
with a handkerchief over her head and face.  
    She whispered  
        ‘Where gone? Where gone?’

Today  
    she sat aside  
        and held her palms upon her eyes  
    and smiled  
        secretly.

About tomorrow  
    I am troubled.

‘Why can’t a dog simulate pain?  
Is he too honest?’

And do you know, I read Wittgenstein from cover  
to cover and never found the answer;  
and all the dogs I questioned  
just gave me that sage stare  
that dogs reserve for preoccupied men.

Kind Mrs Asplen carries  
her big lame Labrador;  
but when she isn’t looking,  
the dog forgets to limp.

**4**

**Ebb**

Only

a bad moment

bleached under the moon

I fingering in your curly crotch

only a timeless sift of hot sands. Only

a worse moment

beached under the sun

I fingering in hot sands only

a bad moment

bleached under the moon.

## 5

### **‘Our love’s a tree’**

He carved those words in the trunk with a flourishing knife.

He was as satisfied  
knowing the roots water boughs

as she  
knowing boughs air the roots.

How could the trunk comment amiably,  
being a convenience for aimless traffic?

## 6

### **My Simple but Difficult Son**

Last week  
I took my ten-year-old son to the zoo.

He peered through the bars at frustrated lions,  
at the llama and placid giraffe;  
and wept.

Afterwards, he refused meat at meals.  
Just baked beans, with potatoes.

This week

I showed him round a canning factory.  
He stared across conveyor belts  
at men who repeatedly bowed, feeding machines  
which fed the men.  
Cans advanced to be filled, sealed and labelled.  
He growled.  
Now he eats only potatoes.

Next week

his mother's funeral.  
I feel strangely reluctant  
to let him attend the burial.

## 7

### Target for Tonight

1944. I was seven. At St John's Junior School, the Headmistress urged us children to help the war effort by bringing along sixpence each week to buy a 'War Savings' stamp. We could then stick the

stamp in a papery 'book'; a full book earned a certificate; and by the end of the war we would possess what she called 'a nest-egg'. I noticed that I was in a minority of kids who regularly brought a sixpence: most kids' parents couldn't afford it then; many of the dads were away at war. The headmistress explained that even sixpence could be crucial: it might be enough to pay for a man to put the final screw into a bomber's control-panel.

One Saturday, my mother took me by train to Gloucester to visit an aunt there. On the way back, we waited at the drab and grimy station that smelt of soot. In the Smith's newsagent's shop, I saw a game in an attractively-labelled cardboard box. The game was called 'Target for Tonight', and the picture on the label showed two British Lancaster bombers passing searchlight-beams and dropping their bombs on a city below, a city already engulfed in flames of crimson and orange. I persuaded my reluctant mother to buy it with a shilling from her purse.

At the dank platform, we then sat on the edge of a strong low wooden trolley. That trolley had to be strong, because its burden was an enormous bomb, waiting to be loaded on to a train to be taken to an airbase. The bomb was about six feet long and well over two feet in diameter. But the most remarkable feature was that it was covered in many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of War Savings stamps, blue, red, green, gold. Most of them were sixpenny stamps, but there were also shilling stamps, some half-crown stamps, and even, here and there in this colourful festooning, some large five shilling stamps. In the cold dank air, some of those stamps were starting to peel away from the grey steel.

My mother explained that the workers in the bomb factory had given their savings to pay for the bomb. 'But why didn't they stick the stamps in their savings books?', I asked. She explained: 'The good people decided to give their money, not to lend it. By doing that, they helped the government and the war effort even more.'

That evening, at home, I opened the 'Target for Tonight' box, but the contents were disappointing. There were four cardboard counters, red, yellow, green, blue; one for each of four players. No dice: you had to cut out a paper hexagon marked with the numbers one to six,

and push a matchstick through the middle of it, to make a spinner. The main part was not even a board, but simply a sheet of paper printed with a winding numbered trail and ending with the word 'Berlin'. There were various obstacles (e.g. 'Flak over Essen: go back three places'), but basically it was even simpler than 'Snakes and Ladders'; a drably austere disappointment after the colourful promise of the art-work on the lid: that exciting picture of bombs falling into the havoc of crimson and orange fire, a city consumed by raging colour.

## 8

### **Garden Town**

A morning in February, 1947.

'Children', said Miss Prince to my class at the primary school, 'You are so fortunate to be living in this garden town.'

She opened a pre-war guide-book and read out: “Cheltenham Spa, Gloucestershire. An elegant town, graced by its fine Georgian crescents and terraces. The wide, tree-lined Promenade is a notable feature, adorned by the aquatic statue of Neptune and his sea-horses, backed by the splendid terrace of the Municipal Buildings. With its numerous parks and gardens, Cheltenham is one of the most beautiful boroughs in England.” Yes, this is a fine town. We should cherish gardens.’

Miss Prince walked along the aisles, putting a blank sheet of paper on each desk.

‘Children: on the paper, in the next half-hour, you will describe the garden of your home. I repeat, half an hour. The title: “My Garden”. “My Garden.” Start – now!’

I stared at the sheet.

The half-hour passed very slowly.

At last she walked along the aisles again, collecting the inscribed pages. When she reached my desk, she immediately glowered.

‘You *naughty* boy! You have written *nothing*! Why? *Why*?’

Some children turned to stare at us. My face glowed hot.

‘Please, Miss, you said, describe the garden at home. My home hasn’t *got* a garden.’

‘What? Not even a *small* one?’

‘No, Miss. At the front, there’s the street. At the back, there’s the back yard: concrete, corrugated-iron fence, coal-shed and a brick wall. Not a garden, Miss. Honest.’

She took up the blank sheet, leaned close, and said, quietly:

‘You should have *pretended* you had a garden!’

May, 2017. Yesterday, wheezing, I needed a whole hour to mow my quarter-acre of grassland. Windblown papers festooned the wire fence.

‘I should – *not*’, I snarled, gasping; ‘should – *not*’; too late.



**War-Time Silver**

1942, a Sunday morning in January. I got out of bed and opened the black-out curtain. The lowest quarter of my window was strangely silvered on the inside by frost. It was a work of art: a fern forest. Clearly inscribed in the frost were hundreds of tiny ferns in irregular

silver rows, their zigzagging overlapping fronds most delicately and precisely outlined. It was a surprise gift; a miracle. But by nine o'clock, the sun had melted the miracle into wetness which trickled to the window-frame and dripped onto the sill.

That Sunday morning, I walked with my father (too old for the army) to his allotment-patch. On the cinder-track near the cultivated area, I saw a peculiar silvery clump lying on the ground, and ran to it. The clump was about a foot high and three feet wide, a tangled mass of thin metal strips, brightly shimmering. I'd heard that at the end of a rainbow, a person might find a crock of gold. Perhaps this was a nocturnal equivalent: perhaps some bright moonbeam had oozed onto the grit this intricate silvery tangle; brilliant white light transmuted into tangible glitter.

'Is it from the *moon*, dad? Is it real *treasure*, real *silver*? Can we take it *home*?'

'It's best left alone', he said. 'It's called "chaff". Metal foil. It's what the German bombers drop, during their night-time attacks, to confuse our radar operators.'

And that night, when I stared at the wintry sky, I saw no moon and no constellations. Instead, there were the ceaseless criss-crossings of the white searchlight beams. Sometimes they illuminated a hovering barrage-balloon: a plumply-inflated silver absurdity high above, tethered like a quaint blind bulbous creature; a caricatural sky-whale, allowed to graze the blacknesses encompassing the warring earth.

## 10

### Axes

1

April, 1945.

On his kitchen wall, the father of my school-friend Graham had stuck a photograph scissored from the *Daily Mirror*. The caption was 'Buddies

and Comrades – the Big Link-Up’. It showed troops meeting in the middle of a bridge over the Elbe in Germany: American infantrymen greeting Ukrainians of the Red Army: shaking hands, slapping backs, embracing; all grinning, jubilant. Against the drab wall, the picture was heartening; I deemed it a fine work of art, portending the death of the Axis.

In the Great War, my father, in the Royal Field Artillery, had survived the Somme and Ypres. The Russians were our allies for part of *that* war, too.

2

October, 1957.

A smoky watch-room by the Kiel Canal.

We, naval National Servicemen, sat in rows, wearing plump yellow-padded headphones, listening to the pale green B40 radio-receivers and twirling the flywheeled wavelength-dials.

On all four walls there hung heavy axes, the wooden handles three feet long, the blades gleaming. Axes, diagonally-barred windows, the radios: to me, a surrealistic combination that Magritte might have envied.

At the tea-break, we’d discussed Commander Crabb and the launch of Sputnik 1.

Crabb, in frogman’s outfit, had swum the murk of Portsmouth Harbour to investigate a Russian cruiser moored there. Fourteen months later, in June 1957, his beheaded corpse drifted into a harbour at Chichester.

The Sputnik, the recently-launched orbiting satellite, proved that the Russians now had the best technology for seeing and hearing military secrets: seeing the airbases, hearing the transmissions. In the sunshine beyond these barred windows glistened our meadow full of diversified aeries: slim, spindly, cagey, angled, hooded, recalling sculptures by Chadwick and Giacometti; suddenly rendered forlornly obsolete.

I audited my allotted wavelengths. At last, a silent spot: no static, no burbling; just the pure silence that precedes a transmission. Then the operator’s urgent voice: Russian numerals in rapid groups of

four: code. I stubbed out my cigarette, stamped the foot-pedal to start the tape-recorder, and scribbled the numbers on my log-pad.

The operator lisped on 'vaw-see-em'. The word was Russian for 'eight'. But, if the speaker were Polish, he would lisp the 'v', saying 'waw-see-em', or would sometimes say only 'aw-see-em'. I beckoned the duty Petty Officer; he listened too; then he phoned other watch-stations, so that the speaker's location could be triangulated. There was a theory that when World War III started, the Poles would rise against their Russian overlords.

'Well done, son', said the P.O.

So I took the opportunity to ask why axes adorned the walls.

'Son, when the East German and Russian troops storm this building, you first use an axe to smash your equipment. When you've done that, *then* you surrender.'

### 3

April, 2013.

While I'm still able to travel, I would like to see the Rembrandts at the Hermitage; so I've booked a trip to Leningrad. Sorry – St Petersburg.

## 11

### Missing the Bus

2.30 on a Sunday afternoon in Cheltenham, long ago; and I was queuing for a bus to Winchcombe. There were five of us in the queue. Then down the road came this drunk. You could see immediately he was a drunk. Unshaven, scruffy, staggering, lurching, waving his arms about, muttering gibberish. We all ignored

him. We turned our backs and hoped he'd go by. You can guess what happened. Instead of going by, he flopped onto a bench opposite us, lay down, and went on rolling and muttering. Well, we ignored him for a good ten minutes.

But then a man next to me said, 'You don't suppose he's ill?'

'He looks drunk to me', I said.

A few more minutes passed.

A woman in the queue said, 'Perhaps we ought to speak to him.' She said to me, 'Go on, you're nearest him'.

Reluctantly, I went over, slowly and cautiously. I said to the man, 'Are you all right?' He muttered something I couldn't hear. I stooped lower. He was saying, 'My heart. It hurts. My arm. It hurts.'

So I trotted to a phone box and phoned for an ambulance, and it came quite quickly, seven or eight minutes later. But that meant I missed the bus to Winchcombe.

As they loaded him in, I asked one of the ambulance men, 'Will he be all right?'

'What do you *think*?' he replied.

Not a very helpful answer, I thought. And nobody thanked me for calling the ambulance, even though I missed that Winchcombe bus. So this story tells you a lot about human ingratitude and unappreciated heroism. Don't you agree?

## 12

### **Bop...Prohibited!**

In 1955, I was eighteen and my girlfriend Marlene was sixteen. She, golden-haired and voluptuously-shaped, resembled Marilyn Monroe, but was younger and prettier, with a slimmer waist, and trusting.

We attended the monthly 'Youth Dance' at the Cheltenham Town Hall. Centrally on the platform, midway between the statue of King

Edward VII and the statue of King George V, stood a notice-board bearing in big letters the uncouth warning:

‘Bop, Jive, Jitterbug, Prohibited!’

So we did waltzes and quicksteps and, for foxtrots, quicksteps again. The band, ‘The Spa Light Orchestra’, was proficient enough, though it had a jeer-jerking trumpeter who missed notes.

Once, for a break, Marlene and I sat in a balcony to gaze at the dancers below. I put my hand on her shoulder. As she was wearing an off-the-shoulder dress, my hand caressed her smooth warm skin. Immediately, a burly attendant behind us stepped forward and slapped my hand away.

‘Any more of that, my lad, and you’re out! Understand? *Out!*’

(During the years that she was my girlfriend, she and I often embraced, and we found ways of relieving our mutual yearnings. But she, trusting me, remained intact, inviolate. These were the puritanical 1950s, before the contraceptive pill was known.)

In 1981, I travelled back to Cheltenham for the Festival of Contemporary Music. In particular, I went to see the Dizzy Gillespie quartet. Gillespie, notes soaring and cascading from his uniquely erect trumpet, played famous bebop numbers: ‘Night in Tunisia’, ‘Oop-Bop-Sh’Bam’ and ‘Manteca’. Backed by a drummer and two guitarists, he strutted on the platform, between the kings, exactly where the notice had stood.

Therefore I wondered what had become of Marlene.

In 1957, she and her family had moved to Edinburgh. That might have been the moon, so far away it seemed ... seems.

I didn’t reply to her increasingly-distressed letters, being baffled by her now-intangible trust.

**Is That *It*?**

I was eight. My friend Graham called on me, excited. His bedroom was in the attic of his parents' house, and he had found a trap-door under the bed: so he wanted me to share with him the adventure of opening the trap-door. We had read *Treasure Island*: we hoped to find doubloons.

I took a torch and string and a hammer.

We pulled on its brass ring, and the heavy trap-door lifted.  
Inside we could see a metal box with its lid bolted down.  
Graham fetched a spanner and undid the bolts. We lifted the lid,  
peering for gold.

Within: several inches of water and a floating ball-cock.

We were looking at the flush-box, operated by a long chain, for  
the lavatory on the landing underneath.

Eight years later I copulated with another friend, Jane, on the carpet  
of the lounge in her mother's prefab: my first copulation.

Shakespeare's Troilus asks:

‘What will it be,  
When that the wat’ry palate tastes indeed  
Love’s thrice-repurèd nectar? Death, I fear me,  
Sounding destruction, or some joy too fine...’  
Jane, then, asked: ‘Is that *it*?’

## 14

### Nepotism

My parents owned two red-covered photo albums. As a child, I often  
studied the photos: there were two showing my parents in uniform  
during the Great War.

In 1956, when I was eighteen, I was conscripted for National  
Service, like every other fit eighteen-year-old male then. At the  
medical, I was asked which branch I preferred, and I requested the



Royal Navy and, in particular, its Coder (Special) branch. My school-friend Clive, two years older than I, had served in that branch, and recommended it, as the two years of National Service would then include seven months of Russian lessons.

To qualify, applicants had to take two days of linguistic tests at Victoria Barracks, Portsmouth. At the end of my tests, I was summoned to an office at the barracks where a stern Wren officer sat behind a big desk.

‘Do you have any relatives in the Royal Navy?’ she asked.

‘No’, I replied.

‘Now, Mr Watts,’ she said, ‘You did fairly well in the tests. But, as you will appreciate, we have to be very selective when choosing candidates for the Coder (Special) branch. Unfortunately, you did not do sufficiently well. You will have to go into some other branch of the forces.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, standing and walking away.

Then, as I put my hand on the door-knob, a picture flickered in my memory. I turned and asked: ‘Did you say, did I have any relatives in the Navy?’

‘Yes’, she said.

‘Well, at home, there’s a photo album, and one of the photos shows my mother in naval uniform, seated at a telephone switchboard: I think it was taken here at Portsmouth during the Great War, perhaps in 1917 or 1918.’

She sighed and said, ‘Come back and sit down again. What was your mother’s name at that time?’

‘Mary Adelaide Cheshire.’

She picked up the telephone and spoke into it. ‘Naval records, please... Yes... yes... Mary Adelaide Cheshire.’

There was a long pause; then a response to her; and she put the phone down.

‘Congratulations, Mr Watts’, she said. ‘Welcome to the Royal Navy, Coder (Special) branch.’

### **Choice and Chance**

Having taken my final exam, I assumed that I would become a teacher of English; so I brought to my supervisor, Matthew Hodgart, my application-form for a teachers' training course. I asked Matthew to write a reference to accompany the form.

He took the form, tore it up, and dropped the pieces into his waste-paper basket.

'You can do better than that', he said. 'Do research for a Ph.D.'

'How do I do that?'

‘You think up a project which will fill three years of research. You send a proposal to the Board of Research Studies. But you’d better hurry: the deadline is in three days’ time.’

That evening, at dinner in Pembroke College’s hall, I told my friend Tim Longville what Hodgart had said.

‘He told me the same,’ said Tim.

‘I’ve thought about it, and I’ve decided to submit a proposal to do research on Sam Butler.’ (This was the nineteenth-century writer we’d often discussed.)

‘No’, said Tim. ‘I’m doing Butler. You can do Joseph Conrad. After all, you were in the Navy.’

And so I did.

56 years later, I lectured on Conrad at a conference in Warsaw. At the end, a kind young Pole helped me to descend the stairs from the platform.

## 16

### Off the Hook

I never meant to be a killer. Not of animals; not of anyone.

Excellent moral upbringing I had: C of E; gave pennies to the RSPCA; sided with the quiet good guy in the cowboy films.

Angling was the start. 1948. I was ten. Bussed to Tewkesbury; fished in the Avon, all that cold January day. Bread-paste bait over a glittering size-16 hook. Eventually, as I cast, this vast white swan swooped, gulped the bait, and flapped away majestically, trailing line: to choke slowly.

August of that year; hot day in the Forest of Dean. Angling again, this time in a lake. At dusk, caught a carp, landed him: plump, silvery, panting. Unhooking him, I ripped his mouth. Next morning, in the farm's out-house where I'd left him on a marble shelf, he gave a great heave; then he subsided. Still alive. Soon, fowl-fodder.

Fourteen years later: Cambridge, the bitter winter of 1962-3. One morning, I was washing in the bathroom of my American girlfriend's flat. She'd recently moved in to this chilly, dank basement. The bathroom reeked of bluish fumes from the rusty gas-geyser. Admiring taciturn acetate heroes, I chose to say nothing about monoxide. Anyway, the night had been disappointing, and I wouldn't see her again. Out of sight, out of mind. I'd let her off the hook; more fish in the sea. Leaving, I just said 'Goodbye'.

'Aah-huh', she drawled slowly, comprehending. 'Well . . . so-long.'

Two days later, her teenage brother arrived from New York to stay in her flat. Cold, he needed a long hot bath.

That's what she said at the inquest.

Now, I'm old. I forget plenty. But not enough.  
Some memories are barbed.



### The Cut Foot and the Sensitive Conscience

---

I leaned against the white parapet of Silver Street Bridge. ‘You see that quaint wooden bridge over there?’

‘Ah’, agreed my father.

‘Yes, we do’, said my mother carefully. ‘It reminds me of the bridge on the Willow Pattern crockery.’

‘Well, it’s called the Newton Bridge of Queens’ College. They say that it was designed by Sir Isaac Newton on special mathematical principles to be the first wooden bridge to be held together without nails or screws. Each part interlocked with the next. Every bit supported every bit. Okay. Now the story goes that one day, the Fellows of Queens’ decided to take it apart to see how it worked, and when they came to put it back together again, it kept falling down. So, in the end, they had to put in lots of nails and screws to hold it together; and that’s why you can see them now.’

‘It just goes to show, you can’t rely on other people to leave well alone’, she said. ‘But I wonder if that story is true.’

My father wrote ‘Newton Bridge’ with a pencil in his C.W.S. diary. ‘They don’t make things now as they did in the olden days’, he said, writing in his neat copper-plate style, pressing more heavily on the down-stroke than the up.

It was five o’clock. I’d met my parents after the graduation ceremony (yes, they’d seen me, they said; I looked very smart; yes, I *had* been a bit unsteady getting up, but never mind). We’d walked along the Backs in a sobering breeze. Memory of Jan and Casey throbbed with my headache. Twice my parents had sat down ‘to admire the view’, but from the way they sighed or said ‘Ah, that’s better’ as they sat down, it was probably because they were tired. I prided myself on concealing

my boredom during a walk along so familiar a route; I kept my temper, even though they repeatedly asked me the names of buildings that I couldn't name, or of trees that to me were just big trees.

I have a sensitive conscience, as is evident, but it is sometimes rather slow to operate. It actually took six years, by which time both of them had been cremated, before their manner that afternoon appeared to my conscience as probably that particular weariness of old age that comes when you see your child's upbringing completed, and that particular anti-climax that comes when you see that your child has become a patronising stranger inhabiting a different land in which, at best, you're a briefly tolerated tourist, and when you must even then, to be tolerated, alternately enact gratitude and self-effacement.

There were some shouted commands from the riverside behind me, and, in turning to see the cause of the shouts, I accidentally knocked diary and pencil from my father's hands. He bent down to pick them up, and two more pencils fell rattling onto the pavement from behind a folded handkerchief in the top pocket of his Sunday suit. 'Bugger – I mean drat it, I'm sorry', he said, stooping stiff-legged. His trilby hat fell off.

'Oh... Harry', she murmured, almost pitying rather than exasperated; she dusted the hat on her sleeve and settled it carefully on his head.

For relief from this embarrassing incident, I turned again to watch the men who were on the landing-stage between the Anchor and the Mill. One was crouching at the very edge, while the other scooped in the water with a long pole. As he lifted it up, I saw it had curly hooks, a triple hook, at the end. A policeman was directing them, while a small crowd gathered. 'Over to the right a bit. A bit more. Now. Now you've got it.'

The two men were sharing the pole, pulling it in hand over hand. There was a heavy soaked bundle just under the surface. The policeman reached down and held on; the others put down the pole and joined him, both groping up to the elbows in the water like eager washer-women; and at last they heaved the

whole body-bundle out, and dumped it with a heavy splock on the planks. Water swilled out of the bundle and cascaded back into the river. The shirt might have been white once, but it was so saturated that the grey flesh showed through it, and the trousers were glossy black from their long soaking. One of the bare feet was criss-crossed by cuts.

‘Oh my Lord’, said my mother. ‘The poor creature. He’s gone, for sure. Don’t watch, Peter. He’s gone.’

‘What’s that?’, said my father. He’d tucked his pencils away and had been still gazing at the Newton Bridge on the other side.

The cut foot was curious. (I was trying to memorise the details to tell Jack.) Some water-weed trailed out of the open mouth, as if the man had choked on green spaghetti; but I could still see plainly that the corpse was Eastbourne: an Eastbourne who must have waded out into the Mill Pool, cutting a foot on the broken glass from the beer-glasses that students over the years have tossed into the Cam there.

I’d got the account mentally word-perfect by eleven that evening when Jack returned to his room. He listened irritably for a while, and then said that he’d heard all about it from the barman at the Mill, who had found Eastbourne’s jacket and shoes and socks on the bank that morning; which quite spoilt my account.

Next day, when we went to the Exam Office to retrieve our ‘creative writing’ submissions, we found that Eastbourne had never delivered them. They had vanished. So the examiners never saw the extract from my unfinished novel (as digressively plotless as reality), or Jack’s subtle poems to outdo Wallace Stevens’, or Casey’s translations of Akhmatova. Our many weeks of intricate imaginative work had been wasted. The rule for this option was that if the examiners didn’t like your stuff, you gained nothing but lost nothing. If they *did* like it, they could raise you; so, for example, someone on the borderline between II.ii. and II.i would rise into the II.i. category. Eastbourne, oozy-locked local Lycidas, whom I (with innocent naivety) had deemed naively innocent, now appeared to be a covert plotter or malicious saboteur who possibly – Jack thought probably – had deprived Casey of a First,



and Jack and conceivably even me of starred Firsts.

## **Reticence**

On the tenth of January, 1912, his fifteenth birthday, my father signed an indenture to begin a six-year apprenticeship in the gentlemen's outfitting department of a Co-operative store. The indenture says: 'the said Apprentice his Masters faithfully shall serve, their secrets keep'. He never told me his masters' secrets.

In January 1915, on his eighteenth birthday, he volunteered to serve in the Army in the Great War. He became a private and then a lance-corporal in the Royal Field Artillery, and experienced the battles of the Somme and of Ypres, which he called 'Wipers'. He had to lead horses, laden with ammunition, from the dumps behind the lines to the Howitzer batteries: the massive guns, steeply inclined, that shelled the German trenches.

He returned home in 1919. There was a deep scar on his neck where a piece of shrapnel had hit him beneath the helmet and above his collar.

When I was a boy, I begged him to tell me about his adventures as a soldier, but he refused to talk about the war.

If we walked across a field where horses were grazing, they would amble over, scaring me, and nuzzle gently against him. He would pat them, and murmur into their ears.

But I could never hear what he said.

After his death, I found in his desk his hand-written autobiography, dedicated to me. I immediately flung it into the black plastic rubbish-bag, so it was never read. Why? I couldn't say.

## **Albatross**

Those albatross, vast birds, on the ocean-run  
Idly befriend ships gliding bitter gulfs.  
The sailors often trap them, just for fun.

Such rulers of azure realms, once dumped and decked,  
Turn awkward and ashamed (their great white wings  
Trail like pathetic oars), so quickly wrecked.

That former handsome flying voyager?  
Behold: a clumsy oaf – an ugly clown!  
Somebody teases his beak with a smoker's pipe;  
Someone else mimics, by hobbling about, this soarer now dragged  
down.

The Poet resembles the prince of thunder-clouds  
Who, haunting storms, derides the archers' knack;  
When exiled, grounded, jeerers all around,  
His own gigantic pinions hold him back.

**On 'Tasso in Prison' (painted by Eugène Delacroix)**

The poet in the prison, scruffy, sick,  
Foot jerkily rolling a manuscript into a scroll,  
Tallies, with eyes that terror sets ablaze,  
Vertigo's flights of stairs subverting his soul.  
His mind's seduced by weirdness, the absurd,  
As laughter stones his head and storms the jail;  
Doubt smothers him, while idiotic fear  
Spawns mutant monsters round him in its trail.

This genius locked inside a stinking cell,  
These howls and grimaces of spectral crowds  
In whirling rumpus drumming at the ear,  
This dreamer whom his lodging's horrors rouse,

Note well. Behold a symbol of the Soul,  
Its dark dreams walled and stifled by the Real.

### **‘Amid her undulating nacreous robes’**

Amid her undulating nacreous robes,  
Even when she walks, you think you see her dance,  
Evoking long serpents that in rhythm writhe  
On ends of batons which magicians move.

Like deserts’ mournful sands and azure skies  
That have no sense of suffering humankind,  
Like the long meshwork of the patterned seas,  
Her self evolves in sheer indifference.

Some charming minerals make her gleaming eyes;  
And in this strange symbolic creature, where  
The purest angel joins an ancient sphinx,

Where all is only gold, steel, diamonds, light,  
There shines for ever, like a useless star,  
The sterile woman’s frigid majesty.

**Charles Baudelaire:**

**Entirety**

This morning, the Devil visited my attic,  
And, seeking to catch me out, he asked me this:  
‘Among all the beautiful things in her enchantment,  
Among all the black or pink features which compose  
Her charming body, tell me: which is the sweetest?’  
O my soul! To the evil spirit you replied:

‘Since her entirety is my salvation,  
There is no single thing to be preferred.  
As everything delights me, I don’t know  
If any particular charm seduces me;  
Like dawn, she dazzles me; like night, consoles;

Too exquisite is the concordancy  
Which regulates the beauty of her form;  
Analysis is impotent to count  
The total of her numerous harmonies.

O mystical metamorphosis of all  
My senses fused in one! Her very breath  
Makes music, and the perfume is her voice.’

**Charles Baudelaire:**

**Cloudy Sky**

Your gaze seems to be veiled with mist; your eyes  
Are mysteries (are they blue, grey or green?):  
Alternately tender, dreamy, cruel, they reflect  
The indolence and pallor of the sky.

You remind me of those days, blank, mild and hazed,  
Which make enchanted hearts dissolve in tears;  
When unknown illness frets and tortures them,  
Their dormant spirit mocked by wide-awake nerves.

Sometimes you bring to mind those fine horizons  
Which misty seasons' suns illuminate:  
Resplendent as you are, dank countryside  
Inflamed by rays which fall from cloudy skies.

O dangerous woman, and climates that seduce!  
Shall I adore as well your snow and frosts?  
From your implacable winter will I draw  
Pleasures that feel more sharp than ice or fire?

**Charles Baudelaire:**

**Music (Beethoven)**

Music often takes me like a sea.  
Then I set out beneath  
A canopy of mist or vast open sky  
Towards my pallid star.

Chest forward, and lungs filled like billowing sails,  
I scale the backs of heaped-up waves,  
All veiled from me by darkness of the night.

Vibrating within, I now feel every passion  
Of a sailing ship that undergoes suffering;  
Fair wind, or the tempest and its convulsions  
Rock me across the gulf's immensity.

At other times: flat calm:  
Great mirror of my despair.

**Refugee from Limbo**



Vague centuries of drift, until at last  
This angel rouses me: 'Hi you! Awake!  
Pope Benedict has banished Limbo!' 'So?'  
'Evicted, you, and all the other souls  
Of infants unbaptised.' 'But where do we go?'  
'A problem, that', he says, and gives a sigh.  
'Hard-liners shout: "The vestibule of Hell,  
For any without praise or blame: that's whole;  
Let them go there!" The liberal faction cry:  
"No, no; give them a better chance; let them  
Apply to Heaven, and let the Lord decide."  
They won; so ask the Lord, you lucky soul!'

I float along on instinct to the Lord:  
Worried, sickly, sprawled on a tangled bed,  
'Who you?', he feebly asks. 'An infant's soul:  
Unbaptised; was in Limbo; but it's dead,  
Closed by order of a Pope; so now I seek  
From you my destination: vestibule  
Of Hell, or bliss in Heaven: you must assess.'  
He wails: 'Soul of an unbaptised? A choice  
Of Heaven or Hell? My memory's a mess;  
It's all too much. The less the people believe,  
The weaker I become.' 'But *me*', I yell,  
'What happens to me: is it Heaven or Hell?'  
'They've gone', he says, 'for want of belief.' (He cries.)  
'Limbo and all, in void, like Tinker Bell.'  
'Who's Bell, and who's the angel, full of lies,  
Who sent me here?' The Lord says: 'Only one  
Is left. Lucifer lasts. But soon we're done;  
Yes, even he. Rhymes fail. The once immense  
Is nothing. Just as well. The story made no sense.  
Rhymes...fall.'

**26**

**Ann and Ron Help the Unlucky Unicorn  
(a fable for children)**

**42**

As Ann and Ron walked 'mid the trees  
Of a dense wood, one wintry day,  
They heard a groaning, moaning sound:  
It seemed not very far away.

They hurried on, and in a glade  
They saw an oak tree, old and dense;  
And at its side a creature writhed  
And moaned and groaned, and then went tense

Because it saw them watching it.  
And they, in turn, were greatly shocked:  
The creature was a unicorn,  
Snow-white and horse-like, but now locked

Into the oak's trunk by its horn,  
Its long white horn with spiral shape,  
Embedded deeply in the trunk:  
The unicorn could not escape.

Ann then approached the beast, and asked:  
"Now tell us, how did you get stuck?"  
"Last night the fog was dense", it said,  
And I encountered some bad luck.

My path led through the land of myth  
And legend, which was right;  
But in the fog I took a turn  
Which, in that murky night,  
Led me into this real-life wood  
That suddenly appeared;  
And as I, panic-stricken, dashed,  
It seems this tree I speared:

And now, the more I struggle here,  
The more I'm getting stuck.

If you could help to get me out  
That would be true good luck.”

So Ann and Ron went close and put  
Their backs against the tree,  
And tried to push the beast away,  
But found their hands went free:

They made no contact with the beast,  
As if it were just air;  
Their hands went through the image:  
So that gave them quite a scare.

But Ron then saw the problem: “Ah,  
The wood”, he said, “is real;  
Yet unicorns are mythical:  
They’re things we cannot feel.

We see him, but he has no mass,  
Like creatures in a dream;  
So how are we to pull him free?  
Not even a rugby team

Could get a grip on this poor beast;  
They would be quite unable,  
As with any other creature who  
Belongs to myth and fable.

The pointed horn, of course, was hard  
And solid, just to show  
A myth can make a truthful *point*  
About the world we know.”

“I see a way”, said Ann; “We’ll call  
A friend to help us here.  
The ghoti has a nature that

Can free him.<sup>1</sup> Have no fear.”

And so they called the ghoti up  
    (Still pronounced “goatee”, now),  
Who gladly, when it heard their call  
    Appeared; and to allow

The unicorn to be released,  
    It backed against the tree,  
And pushed the beast’s head carefully  
    Until the horn came free.

It took a bit of twisting, too;  
    The effort was quite tough.  
But then the unicorn, released,  
    Was soon relaxed enough

To offer rides as a reward  
    To ghoti, Ann and Ron.  
But Ann and Ron fell through it;  
    Just the ghoti could stay on.

The unicorn’s born of dreams and words,  
    And so made, you can see,  
Like gryphons and chimeras  
    And the ancient talking tree –

The tree that, various websites claim,  
    Long, long ago, one day  
Joined in the chat when two wise men  
    Had many things to say.

“Never mind”, said the unicorn  
    To the baffled Ron and Ann;  
“I’ll visit you in frequent dreams.  
    In those, I’m sure you can

Stay on my back and go for rides  
In legendary lands,  
Through ancient forests, ice and snow,  
And silken desert sands,

And back in time for breakfast! That's  
The best that I can do  
To thank you both for your good deed.  
I bid you now – adieu!”

So off he went, the ghoti too,  
And left them standing there.  
But soon they hurried home to tea,  
To speedily prepare

To have an early night, so that  
The unicorn could keep  
His promise; as he kindly did:  
They rode miles in their sleep!

The moral of this story is  
Not “Be prepared”: that's trite;  
It's rather, “Use intelligence  
To put a setback right;

And learn what all good stories teach,  
The knowledge fiction brings:  
That legends penetrate the world  
Of real and solid things:

They bring ideas that shape our lives,  
The world around us, too;  
Yes, fiction and reality  
Make one sustaining brew!”

**Note:**

1. The ghoti had appeared in a previous poem featuring Ann and Ron. He is a legendary creature, his front half being that of a goat and his rear half being that of a fish. This is because the name “ghoti” can be pronounced not only as “goatee” but also as “fish”. (The “g” and “h” in “rough” make “f”, the “o” in “women” makes “i”, and the “t” and “i” in “ration” make “sh”).

**Roland Barthes's Resurrection of the Author  
and Redemption of Biography**

The most misunderstood essay in literary theory must be Roland Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' (originally 'La mort de l'auteur', 1968).<sup>1</sup> Repeatedly, critics and commentators have taken literally

this satiric *jeu d'esprit* and have credulously assumed that it is advocating the very position that it is condemning.<sup>2</sup>

The evidence that they are wrong is conclusive. There are both internal and contextual grounds for recognising this essay as a defence of traditional authorship and of respect for biography. That it has been so strangely misunderstood has various explanations, one of which may be neglect of the tradition of satirical polemics; another may be the conservative tendency of commentators to overestimate the factuality of fiction (particularly when they are making political analyses of novels) and to underestimate the fictionality of critical writing (usually by assuming that the narrator is identical with the author). The literalists have perhaps been corrupted by what Jacques Derrida has memorably termed 'an ethic of nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence and self-presence in speech'.<sup>3</sup> Historic precedent for such gross misreading can be found in the career of Daniel Defoe, when certain satiric pamphlets of his were taken literally and caused outrage.<sup>4</sup>

We should recall the once-fashionable ideas that Barthes was confronting. By the late 1960s, the 'New Critical' ideas of Cleanth Brooks, William K. Wimsatt, Monroe C. Beardsley and their school were widely influential. One of their most famous notions was that of the death of the author. In the essay entitled 'The Intentional Fallacy', for example, Wimsatt and Beardsley derided the idea that authorial intention should be a critical consideration. We should not confuse the criticism of literature with 'author psychology', they explained; there is no point in seeking evidence of authorial intention. If the intention is realised in the work, they said, the realisation is there in the work; and if it is not realised, it is of no interest. What counts is always the literary text, a public object, and not the intention (possibly undiscoverable) behind it. 'Critical inquiries', they declared, 'are not settled by consulting the oracle.'<sup>5</sup> Again, in the well-known essay 'Yeats's Great Rooted Blossomer', Cleanth Brooks insisted that the meaning of Yeats's poem 'Among School Children' was to be found in the totality of its complex structure. To ignore this, said Brooks, 'is to take the root or the blossoms of the tree for the tree itself'. We should beware of (a)



investigations of 'the root system (the study of literary sources)', (b) 'sniffing the blossoms (impressionism)', or (c) 'questioning the dancer, no longer a dancer, about her life history (the study of the poet's biography)'.<sup>6</sup>

While these ideas became widespread in the academies of the USA, in the United Kingdom Dr F. R. Leavis was similarly influential in his insistence that the critical act was a matter of sensitive, intelligent and mature engagement with the words on the page. Repeatedly Leavis excoriated the old romantic and belletristic tendency to read the work as if it were (as Wordsworth said with qualifications) 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. A particular *bête noire* of Leavis was, of course, Percy Shelley,<sup>7</sup> the romantic poet who, perhaps more than any other, had propagated the idea that literature was the expression of inspired beings. 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world', claimed Shelley, arguing that, since all imaginative creation stemmed from poets, their number included Plato, Jesus and Francis Bacon.<sup>8</sup> Leavis's great mentor, in this respect, was T. S. Eliot, who had said that the progress of the artist is 'a continual extinction of personality', so that 'the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates'. Thus, 'Poetry...is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality'.<sup>9</sup> Eliot's fore-runners included the Oscar Wilde who had declared 'A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal'; and beyond Wilde lay Keats's declaration that a poet 'is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity'.<sup>10</sup>

So, by the 1960s, the notion that biographical factors should be disregarded by critics was already widespread. And at last, in 1968, Roland Barthes brilliantly challenged this labour-saving new orthodoxy by using a very traditional method: the method of satire. Usually, the satirist exaggerates and carries to an absurd extreme the idea which he wishes to mock. Frequently, too, his narrator is a character who earnestly recommends the deplorable notion. As a helpful epigraph by Barthes states elsewhere: '*It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.*'<sup>11</sup> Thus, the

imaginary critic who is the narrator of Barthes's mischievous essay offers the somewhat Swiftian claim that the author's self is 'only a ready-formed dictionary'; far from being original, he maintains, this walking dictionary can only 'mix writings, to counter the ones with the others'.<sup>12</sup> (We may recall the book-writing machine constructed by an earnest professor at Jonathan Swift's Academy of Lagado.) Ingeniously imitating Wilde's thesis that 'Life imitates Art', the narrator claims that the historic Montesquiou 'derived from' the fictional Charlus depicted by Proust, and explains that 'life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred'.<sup>13</sup> Just as Swift's narrators would carry a satirised idea from the starting-point of plausibility to a climax of derangement, so the fictional narrator created by Barthes is characterised as one whose dementia breaks through the initially plausible guise. This point of dementia is reached when he says that by refusing to assign meaning to the text, we liberate 'an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law'.<sup>14</sup> The narrator is now revealed as a deranged atheist, one whose attack on the literary author is really an attack on the ultimate author, God; and his derangement is made explicit by his desire to deny reason itself.

Barthes, then, has created a fictional narrator who belongs to the long tradition of Menippean satire: i.e., of satire which (supposedly deriving from the lost works of the cynical philosopher Menippus, who committed suicide,) is both pedantic and anti-pedantic. And, like Swift in 'A Modest Proposal' or Nabokov in the creation of the demented Dr Kinbote in *Pale Fire*, Barthes lets his narrator extend apparently plausible reasoning to the point of patent lunacy. Of course, early in the essay there are various clues to the underlying characterisation. One is the poker-faced assertion of the nonsensical, as when the narrator solemnly claims that the author 'is a modern figure, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism [etc.]'.<sup>15</sup> A moment's reflection reveals the nonsense: one has only to think of Aristotle's *Poetics*, with its discussion of the relative merits of Aeschylus, Sophocles and

Euripides, or Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, in which the characters of Aeschylus (the conservative) and Euripides (the radical) are so thoroughly contrasted, or the trial of Socrates, in order to see that Barthes is planting clues to the characterisation of his obsessed and deluded narrator. Again, this paranoid character laments that 'The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it',<sup>16</sup> although, as we have seen, such explanatory tactics had long been under attack. As early as 1924, D. H. Lawrence had famously declared: 'Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.'<sup>17</sup> Barthes's tale-teller, in warning us against 'arrogant antiphrastical recriminations' (as he does in the final sentence of the essay), warns us against none other than himself. One recurrent sign of that arrogance has been his repeated tendency to present as statements of fact what are actually his wishes. For instance: '[T]he text is henceforth made and read in such a way that at all levels its author is absent.'<sup>18</sup> What he means is that, if he had his way, that is what would happen; he is recommending that the text should henceforth be so made and read. But, instead of thus exposing the element of wishful fantasy, he obscures it by employing inappropriately the grammar of factual statement. Here the narrator may not only remind us of Jean-Paul Sartre's dexterity in lending his personal opinions the authority of impersonally factual phrasing; he may also warn us that if he were a bank-manager, he would cash your cheque and put the money in his own pocket, for 'at all levels its author is absent'.

Another satiric technique is that of deliberate self-contradiction. On one page, Barthes lets his narrator deny the personal agency of the author ('it is language which speaks, not the author'), yet on the very next page the same narrator solemnly announces that 'Proust himself...was visibly concerned with the task of inexorably blurring...the relation between the writer and his characters':<sup>19</sup> a statement which, of course, concedes the importance of seeing the author as distinctive creator. If we did not know of the character of Proust himself, we would have no means of gauging his success in 'blurring the relation' between himself and the characters. As for the notion that it is 'language which speaks, not the author': it would be as logical to say that thought thinks, not the thinker, or that food eats,

not the diner, or that work works, and not the worker. Another and larger contradiction, is, of course, that this declared enemy of reason, the fictional narrator imagined by Barthes, is obliged to use the procedures of reason to make his case comprehensible. The more he excuses himself, the more he accuses himself. In any case, if he is only, as he insists, a 'ready-formed dictionary', incapable of originality and enslaved by the circulation of discourse like every other author, there is no reason why his arguments should command any attention. '[T]he whole of the enunciation is an empty process,...the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered'; 'writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it'.<sup>20</sup> If there is thus no truth, but only empty discourse, this narrator's claims are automatically denied any purchase on reality. He resembles those Aeolists who, in Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, argue that words are wind, that learning is words, and that learning (including their own) is therefore wind.

In addition to this internal evidence, there is ample contextual evidence to verify the proposition that 'The Death of the Author' is a satirical attack on the anti-biographical bias of modern critics. The most obvious piece of evidence (though sometimes misinterpreted) is the fact that this essay was signed by Roland Barthes. If he really believed the views of his fictional narrator, he would not have dared to sign it, for that action would have contradicted not only the claim that the traditional concept of authorship is nonsensical, but also the related claim that the producer of the work is not an author but the reader. Sometimes, commentators may impute a degree of hypocrisy to Barthes in this regard; but that merely shows that they, too, have taken the piece literally.<sup>21</sup> As soon as the narrator is recognised as a fictional characterisation, no hypocrisy whatsoever can be adduced. We do not blame Jonson for Sir Epicure Mammon's destructive greed, or Nabokov for Kinbote's paranoid delusions. Further external evidence is the fact that Barthes not only signed the work but claimed the copyright. If he had believed the position advanced in the essay, he would obviously have waived copyright, knowing that the creator of the work was not its author (since it is language and not the person who speaks) but its reader. In addition, Barthes

mocked his narrator's denial of the distinctive contribution of the author, the denial of the value of biographical approaches, by writing *Barthes par Barthes*, that movingly pictorial autobiography which deconstructs the coy convention of third-person presentation.<sup>22</sup>

On reflection, the evidence that 'The Death of the Author' is to be taken as a satiric work is so conclusive as to make the real dilemma appear this: Why were so many readers so deluded as to take it literally? The answers are specific and general. One specific answer is that readers unfamiliar with the satiric tradition have failed to recognise the text's sly signals. A related answer is the more widespread failure of readers to register the fictional elements of critical writing at large: the elements of dramatisation and plotting (for example, the recurrent plot in which imperceptive enemies are supposedly defeated by the character in the foreground, the narrating critic). More general causes may be postulated. As is well known, although some theoretical writings have had a liberating tendency, anti-democratic and anti-rationalistic rhetoric has been a recurrent feature of many theoretical works published during recent decades. An anti-democratic bias is sometimes implied in their repeated approving citations of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose anti-Semitism was echoed by the Nazis.<sup>23</sup> Martin Heidegger, the Nazi rector of Freiburg University, has been a significantly influential figure (partly by way of Sartre, who in his later years sympathised with the Maoist dictatorship); and, indeed, 'the Heideggerean deconstruction of presence is a constant throughout Derrida's works'.<sup>24</sup> Another acclaimed figure has been Paul de Man, whose writings aided the Nazi cause in World War II.<sup>25</sup> Naturally Marxism, which, for all its insights, is dictatorial both in aspects of its theory and in historical practice, has received hospitality from numerous theorists who generally prefer to live amid the 'bourgeois' democracy they criticise. ('Bourgeois' is often a term which a bourgeois applies to others in the attempt to conceal his true allegiance, just as 'ideology' – so Terry Eagleton astutely observes<sup>26</sup> – is normally a term by which an ideologist seeks to belittle the beliefs of other people.) As George Orwell pointed out long ago, totalitarianism is nurtured by the denial that objective truth is attainable;<sup>27</sup> and such a denial

became a defining characteristic or ‘master discourse’ of postmodernism, that seductive postscript to Pyrrhonism. Therefore, since anti-democratic and anti-rational notions have been rather widespread in some theoretical circles, many readers have been led to regard literally, instead of ironically, the kindred features in Barthes's essay: the tone of intolerant assertiveness, the avowed contempt for rationalism, the approving citation of Brecht (who applauded the East German dictatorship when it suppressed the Berlin uprising), and the denial of historical realities. Similarly, covert misogynists may have felt inclined to welcome a theory which, by denying the role of the author, erases the gender of the literary work's producer, and thus subverts feminist endeavours.<sup>28</sup>

The main claim which I make in this article appears to be logically irrefutable. The reading which declares ‘The Death of the Author’ to be a work of satiric fiction cannot, in logic, be refuted by those who take the essay literally. The reason is obvious. Those who take Barthes's essay at face value are committed to the view that ‘there is one place where this multiplicity [of the text] is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author’.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, ‘a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination’.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, if the present reader, J. C. Carlier, gives clear and unifying focus to the multiplicity of ‘The Death of the Author’ by explaining that it is a satiric *tour de force*, Barthes's essay itself forbids anyone to contradict him. No plaintive protestation that ‘such a meaning was not intended’, nor any appeal to statements made elsewhere by Barthes, could ever suffice to refute the Carlier reading. Indeed, such a protestation and such an appeal would be a betrayal of the literal meaning of the essay ‘The Death of the Author’, and would show that even those readers who purport to believe what it overtly says are, after all, its traducers, poignantly clinging, in spite of their professed belief, to the traditional world of referents, of biographical evidence, and of conventional rationality.

The essay ‘The Death of the Author’ is, in short, the litmus test of critical and theoretical competence. Those who take it literally are the imperceptive who fail, automatically, that test. Those who take it ironically and recognise a work of fine satiric fiction are those who

pass the test; and arguably they alone fully appreciate the merits of the author, Roland Barthes. Perhaps they, prevailing, will help to confer for a while the historic immortality that a champion of biography deserves.

J. C. Carlier.<sup>31</sup>

**Notes:**

1. 'La mort de l'auteur', *Mantéia* 5, 1968, republished as 'The Death of the Author' in Barthes's *Image Music Text*, tr. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, rpt. 1981). (Cited below simply as Barthes.)
2. Those who have taken it literally are, of course, too numerous to list in full here, but prominent literalists have included M. H. Abrams, Catherine Belsey, Raman Selden and George R. Wasserman.
3. Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence* [1967], translated by Alan Bass as *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 292.
4. These pamphlets include 'The Shortest Way with the Dissenters' and 'And What if the Pretender Should Come?'.
5. W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy', *Sewanee Review* 54, 1946, reprinted in Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon* [1954] (London: Methuen, 1970). Quotation on pp. 18.
6. Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* [1947] (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 155. Barthes's eccentric narrator naturally claims that the New Critics have often consolidated 'the sway of the Author' (p. 143).
7. See Chapter 6 of F. R. Leavis's *Revaluation* [1936] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).
8. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* [1821] (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), pp. 59, 7, 44, 51.
9. T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' [1919], in *Selected Prose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), pp. 26, 27, 30.
10. Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', Part 2, in *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Spring Books, 1963), p. 889. *The Letters of John*

*Keats*, ed. H. E. Rollins (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1958), Vol. 1, p. 386.

11. 'Tout ceci doit être considéré comme dit par un personnage de roman': Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* [1975], translated by Richard Howard as *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), p. 1. The words are italicised only in the translation.

12. Barthes, p. 146. Cf. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* [1726] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), pp. 227-9.

13. Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, p. 843. Barthes, pp. 144, 146-7.

14. Barthes, p. 147.

15. Barthes, pp. 142-3.

16. Barthes, p. 143.

17. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* [1924] (London: Heinemann, 1965), p. 2.

18. Barthes, p. 145.

19. Barthes, pp. 143, 144.

20. Barthes, pp. 146.

21. Cf. George Watson, *The Certainty of Literature* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 38. Philip Smallwood, in "'Outside the Analytic Fold": Critics, Theorists and Men of Letters', in *English* 47 (Spring 1998), p. 48, remarks: 'Analysts of modern radical Theory have often commented on the sense in which works of theory pronounce the death of the author.....but have authors whose names appear, like any others', on the covers of their books.'

22. 'And sometimes, the mockery of all this, "he" gives way to "I" under the simple effect of a syntactic confusion: for in an extended sentence, "he" can refer without warning to many other referents than me.' *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 169.

23. See John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), Chap. 4.

24. Alan Bass, 'Translator's Introduction', *Writing and Difference*, p. xi.

25. See, for example, his anti-Semitic essays, 'Les Juifs dans la Littérature actuelle' and 'Menschen en Boeken: Blik op de huidige



Duitsche romanliteratur', reprinted in Paul de Man, *Wartime Journalism, 1939-43*, ed. W. Hamacher, N. Hertz and T. Keenan (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), pp. 45, 323-6.

26. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 211.

27. See not only 1984 but also 'Looking Back on the Spanish War' (1943).

28. Friedrich Nietzsche notoriously offered the advice: 'Are you visiting women? Do not forget your whip!': *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 93.

29. Barthes, p. 148.

30. Barthes, p. 148.

31. Translated by C. T. Watts.

### **Biographical Note on the Author:**

J. C. Carlier's reader-response appraisals of works by Alexandre Dumas the Elder, James Fenimore Cooper and Honoré de Balzac have been published in *Cosmopolis*, Vol. 6.

*The Progress of Dionysus***A Novella**

"The peoples of the Mediterranean began to emerge from barbarism when they learned to cultivate the olive and the vine" (Thucydides).

**1**

The sun warming his back, Polycles looked proudly across the dense acres of his vineyards to the distant snow-capped peaks of legendary Kithairon.

Kithairon was the rugged range of mountains, ten miles wide, which separated harsher Boeotia in the north from benign Attica in the south. The limestone range rose nearly five thousand feet, and fleecy cumulus clouds drifted gently past its glistening summits.

Kithairon he knew as perilous but beautiful, sinister yet benign.

There, for example, according to legend, the infant Oedipus, wailing piteously, had been exposed on a rocky ledge, his feet

cruelly fettered, before his ill-fated rescue. The well-meaning shepherd who was his rescuer had unwittingly brought about manslaughter, incest and blinding.

And it was there, on those wooded slopes, that Actaeon, the hapless hunter, had surprised the goddess Artemis bathing naked, and had been changed by her to a horned deer, to be torn apart, shouting, squealing and shrieking, by his own slaving hounds.

But here, too, Herakles had hunted and killed the Kythairian lion, the first of his great sequence of heroic feats.

As Polycles gazed at the peaks, the legends lived in his imagination, and he felt exalted to be living in a region where gods and humans had met, sometimes perilously. Polycles knew well the benignity of the range, too, for it sheltered from harsh northerly winds the limestone slopes which were so fertile for vines. And the vine made the whole region prosperous. From here, wine travelled through the mainland and across the Mediterranean, borne on sailing-ships to far regions: to Thira and Crete, to Troy and Alexandria, and westerly to the many Grecian colonies.

On this sunny morning Polycles smiled proprietor-ially upon the lush rows of vines. It would be a good crop. Already the vines, supported by poles, were weighed down with dense bunches of young green Bibline grapes. He handled some of the heavy bulging bunches, and sampled some of the grapes: sour as yet, but amply juicy. And how well yesterday the boundary ritual had been enacted! Every year it took place, to ensure a successful harvest, being a protection against disease and misfortune.

In that ritual, a bearded priest of Dionysus pronounced blessing over the cockerel, which clucked uneasily within its wicker cage. Then the priest opened the cage, pulled out the scared fluttering bird, and with a heavy obsidian knife hacked it in half. Two slaves, stripped to loin-cloths, took the two warm bleeding halves of the bird and set off, running in opposite directions, each following the ditched boundary of the vineyard, and shaking the blood to right and left. In fifteen minutes, the slaves met at the far side of the vineyard; they then returned to the priest, who buried the relics of the cockerel, commending them to the godhead.

All had gone well. The handsome fee to the priest was an investment. Now, however, as Polycles looked out over the sunny slopes, he sensed a faint vibration in the earth beneath his feet; a vibration so slight that he wondered if it was his legs that had vibrated, not the earth. But everything looked fine and stable, and he himself was a fit fifty-year-old. He shook his head. No, all was well. Except for the old problem: he was a childless widower, so there was nobody to inherit his prosperous estate. His brother, Cimon, had a full-time career as head of security at the palace.

Polycles had no doubt of the vineyards' increasing prosperity. Soon, in the autumn, his workers would put wicker baskets full of grapes inside wooden vats with a rope stretched above. Then a few of the men would hold the rope for balance while trampling the grapes with their feet, so that the juice made a rich-scented slushy mush beneath them; and all the while the flute-player would play sinuously rhythmic dithyrambs in honour of wine-god Dionysus. The juice would be collected in big jars for fermentation, and herbs and resin would be added, to enrich the flavour. The eventual wine would be sweet, rich and headily aromatic, with a perfume of spiced bilberries.

Polycles was distracted from his complacent reverie by dust rising from a track that led eastwards: a cart was approaching at speed. It turned towards him, clattering and rattling, so that protesting hens scattered away, and finally stopped. Aboard, there was the driver, a servant; and inside were middle-aged Cassandra and her fourteen-year-old son Epicles. Cassandra was the wife of Themistocles, who owned the neighbouring vineyard. Polycles helped her down from the cart.

She was distressed and weeping. 'Please help us', she said. 'Please give us sanctuary. Themistocles sent us away to... to save us.'

'What's happened?'

'Bacchantes led by an arch-priest have laid siege to Themistocles' house, because he wouldn't pay protection-money. He sent me to warn you and to ask you to give us sanctuary.'

‘Heavens above! Does he want me to send help? I could arm some of my men and send them.’

‘They’ll be too late. He was taken by surprise. Last month he refused to pay the arch-priest’s emissaries. He didn’t think they’d strike so soon. The Dionysus cult is set on murder and destruction. They attacked as we left. Like mad things. He sends you his salutations and... and his farewell.’

Polycles looked from one to the other. Cassandra was tearful, her lined face wretched with misery. Her son Epicles, with curly black hair and freckled nose, was blinking back tears. He held a bow and bore a sheath of arrows on his back.

‘Of course I’ll give you sanctuary’, Polycles responded. ‘But what you say troubles me greatly. We are not prepared for fighting here. Come into the house. – Driver: bring their baggage into the house. – Come in and tell me more about what happened.’

## 2

Ten miles to the east, the vineyard of Themistocles was a noisy chaotic battleground. When the horde of Bacchantes and their servants, led by the arch-priest of Dionysus, had come to punish him for not paying the tribute, Themistocles led the desperate defence of his house. From the rooftop he and his men fired arrows repeatedly into the turbulent and shrieking throng that rode and ran about the vineyard and the outbuildings. Some of the crowd fell, but the others rampaged all the more furiously, smashing vulnerable structures and setting light to others with torches, and hurling spears and stones at the fighters aloft. At the rear of the chaotic mob, the arch-priest, a tall long-haired figure on a rearing majestic white stallion, shouted directions.

Themistocles had thought that the deaths from the arrows would cow them, especially since most of the foes were women; but the Bacchantes just became more frenzied. The flames, fanned by the easterly breeze, spread through the outbuildings, devouring the

woodwork, so that from time to time a red-tiled roof collapsed inwards, rumbling and rattling, sending up clouds of sparks that rose into the blue sky. Stones and spears fell and smacked into the roof-floor. The servant nearest to Themistocles cursed as a spinning piece of hurled masonry caught him on the side of the head so that blood spurted. Then the main building was afire, and choking smoke billowed round the defenders.

Themistocles breathlessly consulted his panting fighters. They agreed with him that only surrendering offered hope, though even that was a slim one.

‘Ho!’, he called hoarsely from behind the parapet. ‘Ho there! If we surrender, will you spare us?’

The howling abated at this. He repeated his request.

From afar, the rider of the white stallion shouted back: ‘If you stay up there, you’ll be destroyed by fire.’ He smiled sardonically. ‘Surrender to us, though, and we’ll give you water.’

Slowly, one at a time, Themistocles and his men climbed the barrier of planks they’d placed at the top of the stairway and, ducking through the clouds of smoke, fearfully surrendered to the jubilant throng. They were knocked down, kicked, punched, scratched, until ‘No!’, cried the arch-priest.

On his white horse, he made his way to the front of the crowd and, turning, addressed his followers:

‘Steady yourselves. Steady: that’s better. Now: I promised the infidels water, and water they shall have. The god ordains it, for they denied him. Take them, and throw them down the well, one at a time.’

Themistocles and his men made a last desperate attempt to resist, but were soon overpowered by weight of numbers. Again pummelled and kicked, they were dragged to the well. The circular limestone top was only three feet in diameter; it was surmounted by an iron winch. One by one, in spite of their struggles, they were pushed, tossed or hurled down. There was a drop of ten feet before the first victims hit the water, and then each, struggling in vain, was forced below the surface by the others falling on top: all forming a futile cursing splashing and choking melee of the doomed, arms and legs flailing,

feet kicking faces, writhing bodies forcing prior bodies down through the splashy engulfment into black suffocation; writhing, battered, entangled, crushed, struggling, tortured lungs breathing water not air, inhaling agonisingly stifling fluid, a long turbulent chaotic choking agony before final blankness.

### 3

Much of the time, he was the arch-priest of Dionysus. Sometimes, he pretended to be the god himself. That was when the Maenads needed to be coerced or driven. And occasionally, he *was* the god. Or rather, the god displaced him.

On those occasions, irradiated and empowered by alcohol and the mushroom, the mortal was gone. Instead, there spoke the one who was superhuman, immortal, and omnipotent; and the Bacchantes responded to his surging power and magnified it. Then they and he were in transcendent rapport, sharing and radiating the glaring sunlight of divinity, making the ordinary mortals dwindle to absurdities or change to mere animals for slaughter. Glory reigned; all else was trivial. Souls sang; the harmony filled the resplendent cosmos. In the veins there flowed not blood but sunlight, force and vitality.

Such epiphanies sustained him, amply compensating for the worries of the campaign, for the complicated logistics, and for those moments of doubt which sometimes snaked into his brain.

No: the god was real, objectively real and present; the god who generated so much that was rich and intense in nature all around, and within human nature. At those times, when the arch-priest vanished, a location remained; and the location became filled with illimitable energy and power; the immortal and eternal were focused in one intense radiant harmonic centre. There the godhead held sway.

Sometimes, after such an epiphanic experience, the arch-priest wept with gratitude and reverence.

He loved the paradox that Dionysus was both ancient and new. Dionysus had taught men the culture of the vine, and thus established

civilisation: that is how ancient he is. Yet it is the destiny of Dionysus to be repeatedly slain and reborn, down the ages, at different times and in different locations; so that he is now having a reincarnation as a shapely young man. It is as natural as the vine itself, which, divested of its fruit, must wither and die in winter but regenerate in the spring; ancient but perennially new and young. Like the vine, the god dies and is reborn. Old and young, ancient and modern, he does not defy time, he blends with it, sharing its immortality. He is with time as a lithe goldfish in flowing water: with it, irradiating it, and never subject to it. He reconciles nature and art, soul and body, ancient and modern.

The morning after the destruction of Themistocles' homestead, Dionysus was the reasonable arch-priest, congratulating and reassuring the Bacchantes. On the day after such a rampage, he knew that many of his followers would now feel all too sober, many hung-over and intermittently troubled by what had happened. The dead followers, slain by the defenders' arrows, were to be buried with pious ceremony; the wounded were being tended. When the haze of elation departed, reality could seem harsh, sordid or even horrific.

'You have done well,' he assured them, standing atop a corner of wrecked white masonry. 'Have no doubt of that. Heroically, you have served the lord Dionysus and helped to safeguard our religion and its sanctities. More, you have safeguarded religion itself from the corrupt: the faithless, the sceptical, and the uncooperative. A society without religion is a debased society, placing its faith in mere mortals. But can mere mortals provide the sun, as Apollo provides it? Can they provide wisdom, the gift of Athene? And can they provide the true exaltation, as Dionysus provides it, rather than mere drunken debauchery?'

He listened to the widespread shouts of 'No! No! No!', before continuing:

'Without the standards you have helped to maintain, humankind sinks into decadence and triviality. Only when we share the dimension of the immortals, only when we open our hearts to the divine, do we become fully human and fully civilised. To preserve those standards, of course on occasion we must be stern in justice.



Infidels must die; but it is for the greater good. We magnify humanity by humbly acknowledging the power of the divinity we serve. Blood needs to be shed at times, needfully; a purifying, fertilising bloodshed: the blood that nourishes the spreading vine. The blood of our martyrs confers a special blessing. Feel reassured. By your courageous battling, you are helping to bring about the better world, the world of peace and joy, in which Dionysus reigns unquestioned. Praise the lord!

Cheers and cries of 'Praise the lord!' and 'Hail Dionysus!' arose from the throng around him. He smiled benevolently, looking at faces that were now, in the main, not troubled but eager, indeed radiant. Tonight, he reflected, he would enjoy a private celebration. He usually shared his bed with a young man, sometimes with a young woman in addition. Tonight there would certainly be three in the bed.

In the afternoon, visiting Polycles, he was again the smiling, reasonable arch-priest. Accompanied by four acolytes (a male servant and three Bacchantes) he stepped down from his horse-drawn coach to greet Polycles. In the house, where, of course, wine was served – hospitably but nervously – he briefly reported his conquest of Themistocles' homestead, regretted the necessary elimination of the obstructive Themistocles, and expounded his business proposal. Though presented to Polycles as a plan for cooperation, it was, of course, a demand: in this case, a demand for half the net profits of the vineyard, to be surrendered in instalments to emissaries of Dionysus. Polycles listened, tried to bargain, and was rebuffed. Polycles was conscious of Dionysus staring intently at him, so intently, like a hunting hawk, that Polycles' mind seemed to go blank under its pressure. Weakly, Polycles submitted and agreed. The callers complimented his prudence and departed. Polycles' hands were trembling; he felt like someone recovering consciousness after fainting, or waking after a nightmare.

That evening, over the meal of cheese, ham, olives and tomatoes, Polycles explained his situation to Cassandra and Epicles, who had emerged from hiding-places. 'I have no stomach for a battle, after hearing from you and the arch-priest about the destruction of your

vineyard. Evidently... I'm so sorry to say this... Themistocles has died, just as you feared. I'm bitterly sorry: he was a good friend of mine, as you know. Perhaps the King will eventually rise against the cult. In the meantime, please understand, I want peace. I'm too old for fighting.'

Cassandra sobbed, head in hands.

'When I'm older', said Epicles, his mouth trembling, 'I'll kill that arch-priest; with my bow.' Polycles patted his shoulder gently. The freckled lad looked aside, blinking away the tears.

'But in the meantime,' said Cassandra, wiping her eyes and nose with a cloth, 'we can only thank you, Polycles, for your kindness to us in our misery. You have always been a good neighbour. My Themistocles... Themistocles praised you so often.'

'And, to tell the full truth', said Polycles, 'I value your company. Since my wife's death, meal-times here have been lonely affairs. And now that I have this new worry of being a prey of the Dionysiacs, I need to share it.'

He patted Epicles' shoulder again, but was looking at Cassandra. As she gazed sadly downwards, he thought that though her face was wrinkled, her blue eyes, dark-lashed, looked capable of great pity and great love.

#### 4

King Pentheus was heading for trouble from the first.

Cimon, chief of the palace guards and head of security, tried to tell him. Pentheus wouldn't listen. You could say he asked for it.

(But nobody would have asked for *that*: for what eventually befell him, what ambushed him, what opened him like a prised oyster, what tore him – again and again, tearing, rending. And by *her*. By *them*. By *him*. But nobody imagined it then.)

Of course, he – King Pentheus – chaired the session. Outside, the sun blazed from the clear blue sky; but the marble-floored council chamber of the palace was lofty, cool and airy. Between the tall columns, light breezes made the fine half-transparent curtains lift and billow, lift and billow, as if Zephyros the wind-god wished to bless

them. King Pentheus sat on the curved ebony throne. He looked young for thirty, black-haired, athletic, muscular and fit: you could tell he was a skilled horse-rider and charioteer. But today he was frowning, chin on fist, perplexed. They, his counsellors and representatives of the citizens, sat facing him, apprehensive.

‘Cimon, give your report on these invaders’, Pentheus said, without looking up.

Cimon, hefty in build, sword on belt, stood and spoke with deep voice. ‘Majesty: we reported last time on the potential threat from this leader and his horde, but he is now much nearer. This arch-priest who calls himself “Dionysus” – and at times actually claims to be the god Dionysus incarnate – is now encamped in the foothills just three miles from here. His followers, mostly women, about a hundred, with servants, mostly men, are camped with him, under the fir-trees: some sleeping, some working with the servants, washing and mending clothes, or preparing food and drink.’

‘Horses?’, asked Pentheus.

‘There are numerous horses, and many baggage-wagons with muleteers and servants. Over the months, they’ve come hundreds of miles from the east, across the Persian plains and Arabia, and it’s the same story wherever they make their camp: sleep and work in the daytime, at night drunken rituals and all-night orgies. Violence befalls anyone who tries to check them. They demand service and payment from the townships where they stay. They say they’ll “bless the vines”; usually, what that means is that they destroy them if their victims don’t pay. Then they have to be bribed to depart. They descend like locusts on a region. Three days ago they destroyed the houses of Themistocles, the vintner, and killed him and all his servants.’

Pentheus clenched his fist and thumped the great table. ‘Why has no city made a stand against these travelling parasites, murderers and vagabonds? Why haven’t they been rounded up and captured? Why isn’t this pretender executed?’

‘So far, as we know, cities and townships have compromised and appeased him. Everywhere he has followers and sympathisers. He claims to represent so much and control so much. The vines: they’re

his, he says; and wine, of course; the wine trade, the rites of viticulture, the pleasures of intoxication, the frenzy of release; all his, he asserts. In his rites are used not only jars of wine but also narcotic mushrooms and toadstools (particularly the spotted toadstool called “flycap”), so that his followers often seem demented.’

‘Who are these “sympathisers”?’

‘He gets much support: from the impressionable, the weak, the fearful, the old and superstitious, and from the pleasure-loving young. Youngsters seize the excuse for revels. But older folk go out to him too: from piety, or the pretence of it, or from fear, they acquiesce in what goes on. Other townships have made a deal; they tolerate and appease him, provide food and water (and wine he never lacks). Then, after their noisy nights of rioting, the priest and his followers, his Maenads or Bacchantes, move on. They leave stinking filth and disgusting refuse behind them, ordure, rags, animals’ offal and bones, defiling the fields where they camped.’

‘Why is he heading here, for Thebes?’

‘Revenge. Retribution. That’s what our agent reports. Dionysus hates our secular government. We’re decadent and barbaric, he alleges. And he says we denied and insulted his “divinity”. So he threatens to punish us.’

‘A religious maniac. What weaponry?’

‘Variable. He carries only the thyrsus, no sword: a mere fennel rod topped with a pine-cone. His followers, mainly women, as I said, are unarmed, except for the thyrsus which they can use as a spear, and except for their fingernails, I suppose. But the servants have many staves and bows. The hypocrite claims to bring peace, love and pleasure to all who accept his divinity; but he grants no mercy to those who don’t. When the Bacchantes destroy farms, vineyards, and villages, they kill the defenders ruthlessly.’

Pentheus turned to address the others. ‘I put it to you all: we must teach this mad priest a lesson, him and his drunken murderous vagabonds. Time to make a stand. We won’t be blackmailed. This is not just a matter of repelling vagrants. We represent civilisation, law and order here. Prepare defences. If he or his followers venture into

our streets, arrest them as trouble-makers, jail the lot of them. They offer a threat to the state, so the death-penalty's appropriate.'

Already two of the counsellors, Agathos and Pollio, after looking anxiously at each other, raised hands, seeking his attention. 'Well?'

'My lord,' said Agathos, old and white-bearded: 'Please consider some difficulties. This priest has a sizeable following here in Thebes, even among the royal family –'

'Careful!'

'– but my lord, there could be civil divisions and strife if you follow a severe policy. After all, Dionysus is one of the gods recognised by our city. We recommend a more politic or prudent course.'

'Such as?'

'Let this priest stay on the hillsides with his followers. Allow those citizens who wish to join the rites to do so, for a set period, say two days. Let the priests celebrate him if they wish, by the customary rituals and processions.'

'What else? You'll be saying we should supply them with food next –'

'Your Majesty, that might be prudent –'

'Prudent! Prudent!': Pentheus was standing now, his face pale with fury. 'Prudent to temporise, prudent to give in, prudent to placate, prudent to appease! Thebes is a proud monarchy. This monarch is above and beyond superstition. Civilisation has advanced beyond the phase of placating the imaginary. We have a fine, orderly, peaceful city-state. Yes, we have various temples, respecting the past. But today, our true god is reason. The way of reason is the way of civilisation. This mad priest and his followers: what do they represent? What do they mean? The irrational! The mindless! The barbaric! Drunken orgies, senseless shrieking, a cacophony they call singing; confusion, chaos! We stand against chaos. Against madness. Against – filth! Filth!' His voice had risen; it was almost shrill.

Agathos spoke again, his voice trembling a little, from fear: 'My lord, my lord, we fully understand your indignation. But even the royal family, as you know, is divided. Your own mother and grandfather, supported by the chief priests, have acquiesced in the

cult of Dionysus. The state propagandists, the legendary historians and mythmakers, they all support it. They say that it redounds to the glory of the royal household to link it with the divine. You know they claim that Dionysus was born of your aunt Semele.'

Pentheus swore under his breath. He rubbed his ringed hand across his brow. 'I'm not going through those arguments again. You know my policy. Let the superstitious entertain their superstitions, but don't let it interfere with my running this city-state. What is happening now is a challenge to the state's authority, to *my* authority. This is where a stand has to be made.'

'But if they stay on the hills and don't enter the city? After all, they may move on after their rites. Doubling the guards may keep this priest and his followers at bay.'

Pollio concurred. 'Violence should be avoided if possible. His followers are mainly women, some with babies and infants. And if numbers of our people, our noblest people, are there, decisive action would be impossible. The guards' allegiances would be divided.'

Pentheus stared furiously at him; but then, after a deep breath, seemed to relax. He sat down, rubbed his hand across his broad brow again, frowning. Then he looked up.

'All right: if they stay out there and don't approach, let them be. But if they try to enter, guards will arrest them. Citizens who want to go out to join them for a while may do so, but only citizens bearing the pass will be allowed to return; no travellers, no strangers may come in. Cimon, call out the auxiliaries and reserves, double the number of guards, and have the gates manned at all times. I know we have the funds for that. Clear? Any objections?'

Agathos and Pollio looked worried but said nothing. All the councillors rose, bowed to the throne, and went, arguing among themselves.

Cimon waited near the door while the council hall emptied. Pentheus, chin on hand for a while, reflected angrily. Then he turned to Cimon. 'Well? That suit you? You have your orders. Yet you hesitate here.'

'My lord', he said, 'There is a risk. A big risk.'

Cimon was not only head of security but a regular counsellor to the King, having known him since he was a child, seeing him becoming more confident as ruler; and watching warily as the stresses of power had made him, the ruler, less tolerant, more dictatorial. It seemed that the more he encountered religious opposition within and without the family, the more – and this troubled Cimon – his scepticism emerged. Cimon was not averse to scepticism (he was intrigued by the heresy that ‘man is the measure of all things’); but he was averse to its overtness, which wasn’t prudent. Weeks previously, Cimon had arranged for a woman of the east to join those Maenads and smuggle out messages. ‘Dionysus and his rout definitely have plans for an attack on Thebes.’

‘An attack from outside, aided by people within the city?’

‘Yes, I fear so.’

‘See to it, then. Vigilance. Maintain the curfew ruthlessly.’

Cimon saw no point in arguing, bowed, and withdrew. As he approached the door, he heard someone scuttle away from the other side of it. But outside, the passageway seemed empty, and the curtains there billowed as usual in the pleasant breeze. In the foreground, on land sloping down from the palace, was the marketplace of the busy city, where the vendors shouted their wares to the crowds that jostled around. Beyond them were dwellings in a labyrinth of crowded streets, hemmed in by the city walls. Washed clothes swung on lines that stretched across alleyways, and beneath them children played boisterously. In the distance, towards snow-capped Kithaeron, he saw no sign of the enemy in the foothills. Just green slopes, lush with vines; beyond them, on rising ground, olive groves interspersed with tall cypress trees; and in the distance, green-grey foothills rising to the rocky mountain-slopes.

Cimon was a warrior. He had spent twenty years in the service of the state, and (as his scarred chest and arms witnessed) had fought in the battles which had secured her independence. He had a sceptical outlook on life and was hard to impress. He had heard it said that if oxen or horses or lions had hands to make images of their gods, they would make them in the shape of oxen, horses and lions. But that view of expansive countryside extending to the foothills of the

legendary mountain-range, that view speaking of peace and fertility, still gave him a deep feeling of satisfaction. This was his homeland; this was what he was guarding.

He patted the leather handle of the sword that hung from his belt. Shaped to his grip, the leather was reassuringly familiar.

At that moment, underfoot, the ground seemed to vibrate; but the peculiar vibration lasted only a couple of seconds, and then all was reassuringly stable again. Somewhere deep in the palace, a rod fell with a sharp clatter of wood against marble. Cicadas which had suddenly fallen silent resumed their clamorous chattering: it seemed the cacophonous voice of the afternoon's heat.

---

Later in the afternoon, old Cadmus and his queen, Harmonia, with their daughter Agave, demanded an interview with Pentheus. It was angry. The guards outside the door heard most of it, and duly reported to Cimon what they'd heard. (To do his job properly, Cimon had a network of informants.)

The guards told him that the old Cadmus had been bristling with rage, red-faced, stamping down the corridor to the hall doors, beating his staff on the marble flooring; Harmonia and the beautiful Agave were quieter, but quietly determined to support him. Inside, Cadmus had protested at the proscription of the Bacchantes. We knew who he'd learnt that from: Agathos and Pollio from the council chamber.

'You can't do this!', the sentries heard him shouting. 'It's impiety. Disgraceful. The young god deserves our respect and homage. It's only right. Down the ages, this city has respected the gods, new and old. Who are you to set your face against the wisdom of your elders and betters?'

Then Agave, harder to hear, but evidently concurring with him. In response, Pentheus tried to be patient and tactful. His voice fell to a murmur, almost cajoling. But then the guards heard Cadmus shout "'Exceptional case"? You say this is an "exceptional case"? You dare to make an "exception" of one god? You have no right; you are defying eternal and immortal power! Think again, before it's too



late!’ And he swept out, Agave trotting to catch up with him, and off down the passage they went, Cadmus muttering furiously at Agave.

Cimon recalled how thirty years ago, during a fierce thunderstorm, part of the palace, hit by lightning, had burnt furiously. As a teenager, he had taken part in a chain of bucket-passers (sweaty, swearing, breathless) between a well and the conflagration. But the bucketfuls of water, when flung, turned to useless steam, such was the heat. The curtains, the wooden furniture and the roof-beams blazed, red and yellow flames against the night sky, amid showers of sparks blown wildly by the wind; a crackling noise interrupted by hissing and sometimes a great crash as a burning beam fell and tiles cascaded down, clattering and crunching to jagged shards. The eastern wing was completely destroyed, and in the conflagration the crazy Princess Semele and several servants had died, reduced to shrivelled and charred grotesque forms..

Semele had been pregnant at the time. Always weird and unworldly, she had dared to claim that she had been impregnated by Zeus himself, the supreme god. After her death, the college of priests discussed and eventually endorsed her claim. The fire too, they declared, was an act of Zeus: punishment for her indiscretion in declaring his visitation. A generation later, as the cult of Dionysus had grown, the priests claimed that she had been pregnant with the very Dionysus himself. The god Dionysus, in one of his rebirths, had been delivered from her womb during the fire, being preserved and conveyed away by Zeus. Some doubters, however, claimed that deranged Semele, pregnant by a mortal, had devised the lie that she was impregnated by Zeus, and the fire was Zeus’s punishment for this presumptuous slander. As far as Cimon was concerned, the fire was just bad luck: lightning hits at random; and the aftermath showed that human beings constantly made up stories to render the world more explicable than it really was. Tales impose sense on the senseless; that’s their job. He felt that by our legends we seek to impose moral order on a creation which conspicuously lacks the moral order which would render it comprehensible and congenial to humans. If we feel lonely in the world, we populate it with gods who are just stronger versions of ourselves. If we fear death, we imagine

lives after death. No, Cimon told himself, I don't need tales. But occasionally, strangely, a waft of ... emptiness, that's how he phrased it to himself, passed through him.

At dusk, a servant brought to Cimon the usual invitation to Agave's reception-room. The servant, Phoebe, a withered old woman, long obedient, was one Agave felt that she and Cimon could trust. The maids had been allowed to leave early.

In the opulent room, the colourful mosaic told the stories of two fatal lovers: Pyramos and Thisbe, who died after a misunderstanding. Thinking wrongly that Pyramos had been slain by a lion, Thisbe killed herself, and Pyramos, finding her body, died in turn.

In that reception-room, Agave herself poured the rich red wine (Samian, the best) into the wide golden goblets, and sat beside Cimon on the long couch. Agave was considerably younger than her late husband Echion; she was 43, three years older than Cimon, but still attractive, and she took pains with cosmetics and adornments to make the best of herself. She had a full, voluptuous figure, and a face which in serious moments readily expressed caring and concern; but when relaxing, particularly with wine, her eyes glinted with mischief, and she was quick to giggle and nudge. In private, that is. In public, the soul of discretion.

You could see what had attracted Echion. He'd died of fever years ago. Well, that's the official story. Being a widow, Agave was lonely; so Cimon gave her company; gratifying company. If Pentheus ever found out, Cimon would be killed: a commoner, presuming to defile a princess. Cimon knew he was taking a risk; but it was calculated; and (he had to admit it to himself) he was addicted to her. The risk added to the excitement. He reflected: In this palace, keeping a relationship secret is like keeping water in a cracked jar; it oozes; and if it doesn't ooze, condensation makes it drip – so the rumours condense around a secret. *I* can keep silent. The trouble is, Agave's nature. At least, since I'm in charge of security at the palace, nobody can be suspicious when I roam the passageways looking here, checking there, intruding somewhere else. And if I call on her, well, that's my duty, isn't it, to keep her safe, to check that

she feels secure? I'm not so foolish as to stay the night; half an hour or so suffices; and those half-hours are intense. The things she knows of bedcraft! When we are alone together, she has untiring imagination and audacity. It is what keeps me addicted to her. What next?, I would think; and repeatedly she would surpass herself by some new writhings or fleeting grossness, some outrageous action which seemed the more erotic by contrast with her regal dignity in public. She was addictively and shamelessly lustful. As shameless as when she served the rich red wine undiluted, barbarian-style. Braziers perfumed the big room with cinnamon and myrrh. The adjacent bedroom was dark but richly scented with musky odours.

That evening, she, naked, after kissing and fondling him, made him strip and stretch out on the bed while she, with her back to him, sat on his loins and penis, and moved rapidly and rhythmically up and down while simultaneously writhing with her lithe hips so that, quicker than he wished to, he was brought to a grunting, groaning climax. Then, turning round and lying beside him, she eagerly guided his twirling lubricated fingers so that she, soon, sighed in completed pleasure. The finest, lightest beeswax ensured that his fingertips imparted the fullest erotic frisson.

Later that evening, resuming his patrol, Cimon walked down the long street where vendors of wine, fish, fruit and vegetables maintained their colourful stores. Looming over them was the wooden scaffolding where a new amphitheatre was being constructed: three times the size of the old amphitheatre which had been outpaced by the growth of the city-state. Greeting friends and associates as he walked through the crowds, Cimon approached the temple of Dionysus, which had been erected several years previously by order of Cadmus and Harmonia. In the bushes outside, cicadas chattered. Inside, in the shady coolness, beside the altar, stood the statue of the god. Cimon appraised it critically. The god was crowned with an evergreen crown of ivy, held a thyrsus, and wore a fawnskin; he had long flowing hair, and his body was not muscular but smooth and supple. His mouth was set in a half-smile, so that his expression was both pleased and sardonic. Learning of the approach of the travelling celebrants, the priests had garlanded the altar with

ivy and wreaths of bright-berried bryony. Numerous citizens had thronged there to pray and pour libations. Cimon reflected that when conflict started, the guards would be loyal to Pentheus, and could slaughter the travellers; but, within the city, there could be sustained strife, as Cadmus would be prepared to lead devotees of Dionysus against Pentheus himself. That was the main risk. Another, as he had explained to the king, was that if Cadmus and Agave joined the celebrants in the open fields, some guards would hesitate to attack.

That night, Cimon slept lightly, as was his custom, wakening at a distant cry, a dog-fight streets away, and once, troublingly, a vibration which set his bedside goblet rattling against the water-jug. Having experienced an earthquake, he knew this might presage a greater shock; but the night remained still.

The next morning, Cimon climbed the steps to join the guards on the limestone ramparts by the main gate. They looked out to the east, where a low hazy sun shone steadily towards them over the sandy hillsides and tall cypresses. Then, together, they saw it: the glitter and white flecks of a distant procession surmounting the hills and, like a slow spangled stream of many colours, cascading down the slopes between the wooded rocky outcrops towards the great plain beyond the walls. The eastern breeze brought faint undulating sounds of music: zithers, tambours, flutes, and singing; and as the procession neared, its people could be seen individually: the tall leader on a white stallion, one hand on the reins, the other hand lightly holding the thyrsus, his rod of office, sloped against a shoulder, like a spear. Beside him were women holding banners; behind them were women and servants playing instruments; and beyond them, on horses and mules, more and more women, singing, calling, shouting; and, last, the untidy rabble of baggage-carts with their male drivers and servants, some holding bows and spears. Then they halted, and slowly their tents were erected on the plain.

Sentry Demetrius laughed. 'What a rabble! A priest, musicians, women, baggage slaves! Two hundred at most! A single armed charge and they'll run away as soon as they see us coming.'

'It's not that easy', said Cimon. 'A lot of the townspeople want to join them; they're already assembling for passes down below.'

Indeed, since soon after dawn, a throng of women and some men, mainly old, had gathered at the revenue office by the gate to seek passes; but now there were also some well-to-do young folk; and, as had been decreed, they were being issued with the passes. Then, on litters borne by liveried servants, the royal group arrived at the gate: old Cadmus, the former king, and his wife, Harmonia. Then there were several royal female cousins, and a retinue of lackeys and maidservants, baggage-carts with tents and food, and gifts of food and drink for the Bacchantes. Of course the royal group sought no passes; but who would dare stop them? Bowing, the guards opened the high wooden gates, and the procession swept regally through, silver harnesses jingling, the wheels crunching on sand and grit. The sun was rising in a cloudless sky

In the palace, Phoebe had been admitted to Pentheus, saying that she brought a message from Agave. Old age had made withered Phoebe avaricious; and Pentheus had paid her well occasionally in the past for the gossip she had brought him; but this day she brought a report that made him snarl with exasperation.

In the mornings it was Pentheus's custom to go horse-riding with two courtiers; but today he raced them more recklessly than usual. He urged on his bay charger, hacking at its flanks with a short whip, digging silver spurs harshly into its side; so that he soon outpaced the courtiers on their mounts. They raced across the sandy ground, dust billowing in the breeze. He shared the power of the beast; he was one with its rippling jolting muscle and sinew; the legend of the Centaurs was true; he knew it; he felt it; man and horse were one. Energy, power, speed and heat coalesced. Eventually he halted at the rocky outcrop which marked the goal. He waited for the breathless courtiers to come alongside, praising his speed and courage. Gratified, he rode back to the stables, and dismounted, sweaty but placated. The violent horse-ride restored his equanimity. It usually did.

While Pentheus had been holding his meeting at the palace, another meeting had been taking place at another part of Thebes, hundreds of metres away. In a large room at the rear of the temple of Dionysus, priest Archimandros, three fellow-priests and two citizens were holding an earnest discussion.

Bearded Archimandros led. 'The leader of the newcomers claims to be the god Dionysus; and we have no reason to doubt this. Many reports have reached us of his amazing power and his ability to subjugate whole regions with great speed. It behoves us to meet him, to welcome him and to revere him. His divinity brings glory to Thebes, where, according to legend, in one of his incarnations he was born to Semele during the lightning-storm: yes, born to Semele and to Zeus in his glory. But we face grave difficulties. Prince Pentheus has been corrupted by sceptical teachers. He is, by all accounts, no better than an infidel. Yes, he has attended some religious ceremonies, pouring libations to Athene, Demeter, Artemis and Apollo. But he utterly denies the godhead of Dionysus, and threatens to oppose by force any approach to the city by the lord Dionysus himself. So I am consulting you now about the course that we should take.'

Chiron, an elderly priest, said in a quavering voice: 'The only true course is ... is ... the course of faith. We should go out to greet the god, to revere, yes, revere him, and above all to welcome him into the city which is ... after all ... his very birthplace. Indeed yes.'

Priest Kallisthes looked worried. 'Prince Pentheus will deny us – and him – entry. Guards will obstruct our return to the city. What chance would Dionysus' followers, mostly women, stand against well-armed and ruthless soldiers?'

'But Dionysus has ... supernatural power. No doubt of it, no doubt... With his leadership, his followers should prevail against soldiers serving an infidel. Besides, members of the royal family will have joined his retinue. Loyally, loyally ... Would the guards really draw their swords ... dare to draw their swords ... against royalty?'

Chiron reflected, cleared his throat, and said: 'If it comes to a battle, which seems inevitable, Dionysus, being divine, should indeed prevail. But the ways of divinity are sometimes inscrutable,

and his victory may not be speedy or direct. But if he prevails, as he should, our position is immensely enhanced. No one can then doubt our authority or our primacy amongst the temples of the city. Three priests and I should head the delegation of devotees to revere and welcome the god. Meanwhile, two priests and some of the stalwarts of our congregation will form a guard here at the temple, in case soldiers loyal to Pentheus try to despoil or vandalise the place. Above all, one of us must lead some of the faithful to the west gate, I have information that makes that move essential. This may be a historic occasion: the time when atheistic scepticism was overcome by the faithful and by the manifestation of the godhead. Is there agreement?’

Heads nodded in assent.

‘Let us, then, proceed to the sacrifice; and may the omens be good.’

## 6

The eastern gate had been heavily fortified, as it was that side of the city that faced the Dionysiac horde.

That night, the six guards on the west gate heard sounds of a crowd approaching from within. They drew their swords and peered back into the darkness. Then arrows were flying at them; two guards fell at once; a third, struck in the arm, swore and shouted defiance, and rushed at the oncomers. Three men seized him, pulled him down, and stabbed repeatedly until he lay inert in the growing puddle of his own blood. The other three guards, fighting desperately, wounded and slew some attackers but were overcome by the sheer weight of numbers, of yelling people wielding spears, swords and daggers.

The mob was under the orders of a priest from the temple of Dionysus. ‘Now’, he cried, ‘Open the gates and stand aside!’

The bars were drawn from the iron staples, and the heavy wooden gates were heaved open. To triumphant cries, there entered a procession headed by Dionysus himself, on his white horse and waving the thyrsus. He smiled proudly. The followers were armed

men-servants. They headed jubilantly towards the temple of Dionysus.

---

Three breathless messengers woke Cimon, who hastily dressed while giving them orders. One messenger was sent to the barracks to order a large detachment of soldiers to head for the temple of Dionysus; another detachment was ordered to retake the west gate. A third messenger was sent to the palace, to alert King Pentheus.

Minutes later, Cimon, on horseback, reached the square outside the temple. Inside were Dionysus and numerous priests, and the temple was surrounded by his armed followers and some armed townspeople. As loyal soldiers arrived, they took up positions around the locality, forming a siege. Cimon called over a veteran captain, Apollidorus.

‘Do you think we can starve them out?’

‘If we take our time, sir, that allows some of their supporters in the city to rise against us. We have better armour and weaponry, and we just outnumber them. I think we should go in now.’

‘No. We’ll be at a disadvantage at the entrance: it would be like an ambush. Make it a siege. Apart from wine for libations, there’s nothing to sustain them in there.’

‘Very well, sir. Your decision. We’ll do that.’

Cimon shouted commands, and the soldiers spread out in a cordon round the building. Cimon also sent a detachment to strengthen the defenders at the eastern gate, in case of a diversionary attack there. Other soldiers were to patrol the streets around the temple.

So the long siege began.

That evening, Cimon left a lieutenant in charge, with orders to send a messenger to the palace to call him should any change in the situation occur. Later, as Cimon emerged, sated and still rather drunk, from the queen’s room, he was violently seized. One man had him by the throat, another punched him in the stomach, and a third tried to rope his hands to his sides. He reached for his sword, but



another blow to the stomach and further pressure to his throat left him struggling for air, and in vain. He blacked out.

He was awakened by water hurled into his face; but before his eyes could focus, he was slapped hard on one side of his face, then the other. He found he was tied to a chair, and facing him was King Pentheus, backed by three soldiers.

There was a brief subterranean rumbling, little more than a vibration.

The King ignored it. His face was white with fury. ‘Alas, you betrayed my trust’, he said. ‘Cimon, Cimon! You dared to fornicate with a princess. You’ll be punished at length before being hanged. And I’ll look in from time to time. You disappoint me so much. I trusted you. You know what a punishment for sexual transgression ought to be? Remember the history of that great Theban, Oedipus?’

Cimon’s mouth was dry, and involuntarily he trembled. He kept silent.

The King leaned forward, and produced a slim sharp dagger from his belt. It was razor-sharp and finely pointed.

Cimon struggled against his bonds, but they were unyielding. The King put his left hand above Cimon’s left eye, to hold it steady, and slowly brought the dagger’s point to within an inch of the eye.

Cimon, trembling, urinated incontinently, the hot flow streaming down his leg.

‘Disgusting’, said the King, stepping back from the steaming spreading pale yellow puddle. ‘Here’, said the King to the nearest guard, ‘You do it. Left eye.’ He handed the sharp dagger to him.

Stepping into the puddle, the guard yanked Cimon’s head back by pulling his hair with one hand; the other held the dagger. ‘No’, muttered Cimon. ‘No’. He shut his left eye tight as the dagger’s point slowly approached.

The guard pressed the point very gently against the eyelid. The point pierced first the skin (shedding only a speck of blood) and secondly the eyeball’s delicate surface. The guard gave a very gentle twist to the knife, and, as Cimon shrieked in pain and despair, the grey vitreous fluid poured out of the torn and shrinking eyeball and down his cheek.

The guard was pleased with this fastidious act of surgery. He had used the dagger so skilfully that Cimon, though now blinded in one eye, was not in danger of death, the knife having not proceeded beyond the eyeball into the brain. 'Shall I do the other eye, your Highness?', asked the guard.

'No', said Pentheus. 'Not yet. I want him to be able to see the interesting results that the torture will inflict on his body. Meanwhile, throw him into his cell. And then mop this filthy floor.'

As the guard carried out the tasks, there was a subterranean rumbling, and this time some dust fell in a thin stream from the stone ceiling.

---

Themistocles, in charge of the soldiers besieging the temple, was puzzled by Cimon's failure to return. He ordered the soldiers to be doubly vigilant in the sultry night. From time to time the ground seemed to tremble, but so subtly and briefly that it was hard to tell whether the effect was in the ground or the person sensing it.

From inside the temple, there were sounds of singing: wild and energetic, accompanied by drum and flute: the people inside sounded more like happy celebrants than a besieged garrison. Then, precisely at midnight, the music ceased; there was a pause; and the great doors swung open.

On the threshold stood the arch-priest of Dionysus, conspicuous by his height, his long hair and his brandished thyrsus, surrounded by six attendant priests.

'Ho there!', called the arch-priest. 'Ho there!'

Among the soldiers facing the entrance, the archers aimed their arrows at him.

'Are you surrendering?', yelled Themistocles.

'I need to talk to your ruler', said the arch-priest. 'If you grant that, my followers will leave the temple peacefully.'

Themistocles conferred with the soldiers nearest him. Then: 'Very well', he said. 'You and your attendants must surrender to me, now. I'll pass your request to King Pentheus. At dawn, your followers in the temple will be allowed out, one by one.'

The arch-priest and the attendants submitted to being led, surrounded by the guards, to the prison where the six were confined in the big main cell. The arch-priest, strangely tranquil, even smiling gently, was confined by himself in a small adjacent cell, reserved for prisoners of high value.

In the big cell, Cimon had been sitting in a corner, holding a torn piece of his robe to his blinded eye. Then the gate had been opened to admit the six followers of Dionysus. At first, they didn't recognise him. Cimon tensed. The one of the priests came over and looked at him critically, and, within moments, recognised him.

'Well, well, look who's here', he said. 'A bit the worse for wear; but it's definitely Cimon. Yes, Cimon: once the head of the guards who persecuted us.'

He aimed a kick at Cimon's crotch. Cimon seized his foot, twisted it, and stood up swiftly, throwing the man on his back; he put his sandalled left foot on the man's throat, and twisted the foot he was holding until a snapping noise and a shriek from the man announced a broken ankle. Then the other five rushed at him, punching and kicking.

---

Pentheus had not retired to sleep that night, being preoccupied by the reports of the incursion and infuriated by the revelation of Cimon's treachery. With his two guards he hurried to the cell where the archpriest was held captive. On the way, there was a further subterranean rumbling.

'It's not safe here', said a guard.

'It's just a tremor', said Pentheus. 'Ignore it.' In the past week, there had been so many brief tremors that he was inured to them.

Dionysus stood smiling as they entered.

'Now,' said Pentheus. 'Now we have you. An impostor, an arch-priest who dares to take the identity of a god.'

Dionysus sighed. 'So you say', he replied. 'But you'll learn. You'll learn about my rites. Eventually, you'll submit to them.'

'Your – rites', snarled Pentheus. 'Orgies more like. Just an excuse for drunken fornication. Filth.'

‘No’, said Dionysus. ‘You yourself will witness how chaste and restrained our rites can be. Just disguise yourself as one of my followers, and you’ll behold the truth.’ Still smiling, he was staring eagerly into Pentheus’ eyes.

Pentheus stepped back. Half contemptuously, half uncertainly, he was about to say ‘Behold the truth, indeed’, when there was a loud rumble, a violent upheaval of the ground, and stone and dust fell from above. Pentheus stumbled; the guards seized Pentheus to help him out, back through the gate, but as they did so another heavy shock and louder rumble caused the far wall of the jail and its barred window to collapse, and dust filled the air, blinding, choking. Shattering noises of masonry falling, timber breaking and tiles smashing. Blackness; long blackness; then dusty light.

Coughing and spitting grit, a bruised Pentheus found himself being hauled from rubble by the arch-priest. All around was dust, smashed stone and fragmented red tiles, a building reduced to chaotic ruin. From beneath a great heap of masonry, the motionless foot of one of the guards was visible.

‘See?’, said the priest, panting as he sat Pentheus on the base of a broken column.. ‘See? This is what happens when you take arms against a god. He has destroyed your prison.’ His face was streaked with dust and sweat.

Pentheus rubbed grit from his eyes and looked around, blinking. This end of the prison was destroyed, but beyond were intact walls, and, as the cloud of dirt and sand settled, he could see intact buildings in the street.

‘Most of the buildings are unscathed. But you – you have escaped. I’ll have you jailed again elsewhere.’

‘Be sensible. You are mortal; he is a god. I represent him. Learn sense, and sacrifice to him.’

‘Sacrifice! I will indeed – a sacrifice of women’s blood, slaughtered in the valleys of Kithaeron.’

‘You will be defeated. The rods of Bacchic women will pierce all your brazen shields. But there’s a compromise I offer. Look deeply into my eyes, and you’ll see how genuine it is. Look deeply. I dare you. Yes, good.’

As Pentheus stared into the blue eyes, he felt a strange relaxation, as though stress and worry were dissolving. Alarmed, he tried to look away, but in spite of himself felt obliged to look back, to stare again at those gripping eyes.

‘Now’, said the priest, ‘That’s better. You’re calmer now. We can speak together now like reasonable beings. Would you like to watch those women, revelling together, on the slopes?’

‘I... I would give much to see them... I don’t approve of drunken and drugged conduct. Disgusting.’

‘But nevertheless, you would like to see their secret revelries...’

‘If I could just sit beneath the pine-trees to watch... For confirmation of their outlandishness.’

‘However secretly you went, they would detect you. Unless you were well disguised. Shall I show you the way, then? Are you bold enough to venture on this?’

‘Bold enough, of course. Yes, yes: show me, I command you.’

‘First, dress yourself in a long gown of finest linen.’

‘A *gown*? Me? You’re daring to joke.’

‘If the Bacchantes there see you dressed as a man, they may kill you.’

‘Savages that they are! But, yes, the disguise is then necessary, I see. But...but how would I set about it – even assuming I would sink to that?’

‘I’ll come into the palace with you and will give you every assistance.’

‘Assistance – at dressing like a woman? How dare you! I would be mortified!’

‘Lost your enthusiasm for watching the Maenads at play, have you?’

‘No, I didn’t say that. Not at all. How – How would you dress me/?’

‘First, I’ll cover your head with long flowing hair, a wig from the servants’ box; then a snood will cap the wig; and next a fine robe that extends to your feet.’

‘What else?’

‘A thyrsus to wave, and a dappled fawn-skin wraps the robe.’

‘I’m not sure about this. I surely can’t... can’t do this...’

‘If you simply attack the Bacchae outright, there will be dire bloodshed: and your foes include your family.’

‘True: first I must go to observe them, that’s clear.’

‘That is wiser than inciting violence by initiating it.’

‘But how shall I walk through the streets of Thebes unseen?’

‘One of my local supporters will guide us through the backstreets.’

‘I must not be laughed at by the Bacchae: anything rather than that. Now I will go into the palace and make my final decision. Either way, I order you to follow me. You are my prisoner, remember.’

‘Go ahead: I give you my word I’ll follow. You are used to accepting obedience.’

King Pentheus walked up the wreckage-strewn road to the palace, like one in a trance. Around him, buildings seemed to shimmer and undulate beneath the glaring sun. The arch-priest hailed a group of his followers. Having clambered from the wrecked end of the prison, they were resting on rubble. Dust had blanched their faces. Their staring eyes seemed to look through masks.

‘Women, behold this King. He seeks to visit our fellow-Bacchantes on the hillside. He will witness our rites, and he shall eventually accord recognition to the son of Zeus, to Dionysus, the god who brings blessings to all his followers but brings retribution to all his enemies.’

He embraced each of them in turn, and the group walked up to the palace, and on, inside. The place was deserted, the staff having fled when the earthquake started to damage buildings nearby. The women searched the servants’ quarters, largely intact, and soon found what was needed for the transformation. The wig, the snood, the gown. A thyrsus? They could provide that. The fawn-skin too. In the throne room, Pentheus was awaiting them, his cheeks flushed, his eyes excited. Gladly he tried on the wig, the snood, the gown, the fawn-skin. Awkwardly he waved and twirled the thyrsus. Clumsily he made dance-moves, bobbing and nodding his head. Around him, it seemed to him that the walls still undulated, and the priest changed

and changed again, sometimes becoming radiant as sunlight, sometimes more animal than human, confusing yet fascinating. Everything Pentheus looked at seemed intense, mobile, hallucinatory, capable of transformation. He was bewildered but partly entranced.

‘Excellent!’, cried the arch-priest, smiling gently as he stared into Pentheus’s eyes. ‘Now you are ready: ready for sights you should not see, for acts you should not witness. Now you are ready to spy on your mother and her company. With ease, now, you would pass as one of the daughters of Cadmus. And you have become a visionary. Do you see a transformed world?’

Pentheus nodded, bewilderment increasing. ‘I seem to see two suns; yes, two suns in the sky; and here below, the palace has a double entrance; and you, standing before me: why, you are part man and part woman and part bull: you shimmer between appearances; now the bull waves its high horns, yet I fear it not; and now it is you, the priest; and now it is a Bacchante, smiling and beckoning; and now it is you again. So strange, strange...’

‘Now you see as you ought to see. Enlightened, you are a seer. The god is with you, helping you, enlightening you.’

‘And do I look right? Like my sister Ino perhaps, or like my mother Agave?’

‘You resemble them closely. Oh, except for this curl: you’ve just shaken it out of place. Just a moment while I tuck it back beneath the snood: there, that’s just right. But your girdle is rather loose, and the folds of your gown do not hang straight to your ankles.’

‘I see what you mean; no, they don’t hang right there; but, on the other side, the gown hangs well, right down to the heel. And the thyrsus – should I hold it in the left hand or the right?’

‘Hold it in the right, and raise it at the same time as you raise your right foot. Try it.’ (Pentheus practises, awkwardly at first, then with more confidence.) ‘How good to see you so changed in mind.’

‘I shall hide among the pines, to watch.’

‘Hide? Yes, you will find the right hiding-place, from which you can watch and see everything, yes, everything the Maenads do.’

‘Yes, I can imagine them now: entwined and writhing in the snare of love.’

‘Perhaps you may see that. Perhaps you will catch them in the very heights of ecstasy.’

‘Now lead me out, through the back-streets of Thebes. No one else dares to do this. I am the only man among them!’

‘You alone suffer for the whole city, you alone. The struggle that awaits you is your destined ordeal. Come, I will deliver you safely. Someone else will bring you home.’

‘You mean my mother?’

‘A sight for all to see. You will be carried home – ’

‘In splendour!’

‘Brought by your mother.’

‘Now, don’t make me sound like a weakling.’

‘That was just a way of putting it,’

‘Yet my return shall be my deserved culmination.’

‘It will ensure your fame for ever. Now, forward, to Kithairon!’

---

Cimon regained consciousness. His ruined eye-socket stung, and he was half-suffocated by the weight of bodies on top of him. Laboriously, inch by inch, he dragged himself free. His assailants were either dead or unconscious from the masonry that had fallen on them. His chest and arms were bruised from their attack, but it seemed he had no broken bones. He crawled through rubble, then, with a painful effort, stood and looked around. Most of the prison was demolished, and beyond, where once had been a broad avenue, fallen pillars, walls and roofs created a chaotic route between ruined buildings; beyond them, however, he could see buildings that were largely intact. He resolved to make his way from the damaged city to his brother’s farm.

---

As dawn broke, a servant led Pentheus and the priest through the back-streets cluttered with broken stone-work and red tiles, to the wall. The eastern gateway was now a pile of rubble, unguarded.



They scrambled through the rubble, crossed a grassy field, and waded the cold waters of the shallow river Asopus. They walked over the breezy plain, passing long vineyards, and began to climb the grassy foothills of Kithairon: now the priest took the lead, eagerly.

Eventually they reached a valley full of streams, with cliffs on either side; and there under the shade of pine-trees, the Maenads were sitting. Some were twining with fresh leaves a thyrsus that had lost its ivy; others were singing holy songs to each other in turn. They refreshed themselves with wine and mushrooms. Some, including Cadmus's daughters, lay entranced, embracing. Evidently the carters and other male servants were forbidden to approach the celebrants.

But Pentheus said, 'From where we are standing, I cannot clearly make out these pretended worshippers, these Maenads.'

So the priest helped him to start to climb a tall pine nearby, a pine sheltered by cliffs. On and up Pentheus went, from branch to branch, struggling to free his gown from repeated entanglements, until he was perched high above the glade. And there he relished the scene below: yes, some of the Maenads were naked and embracing beneath the hot sun. He leaned out from his branches, staring intently, lips parted.

It was then that a loud voice – surely that of the god – cried: 'Women! I bring you the man who made a mockery of you and of me and of our holy rites. It is the king of the infidels. Now punish him!'

The whole air fell silent; the glade was stilled; the women were as if paralysed. Then slowly the entranced ones stood. The voice called again, even louder: 'There he is. in the lofty cypress. Punish him!'

Cadmus's daughters dashed forward, and the Maenads followed them. Up the valley, along the stream, over the rocks they ran. When they saw Pentheus perched high in the tree, some scrambled up the cliffs beyond him and hurled pieces of stone at him; but the shots fell short.

They climbed down, and joined others at the root of the great pine-tree. Here they broke off branches to use as levers, poking about the upper roots, finding leverage, splitting the roots, and again

seeking leverage. Some of them clawed the earth away with bare hands. Again and again they tore up roots or split them, and opened a cavity in the earth. At last the great tree gave a sudden lurch, and sagged. They renewed their efforts. Then, at first slowly but with gathering momentum, the great pine lurched again and began its final fall. And as it fell, so Pentheus toppled from his perch and, with flailing arms and legs, dropped, hitting one branch after another, and fell to earth. He lay groaning, with broken limbs.

First his mother, a priestess, approached, and cautiously leaned down over the strange creature she saw. Awkwardly, he pulled off his headband and with a trembling finger gently touched her cheek. 'Mother', he whispered, 'I am your son, Pentheus, whom you bore to Echion. O mother, have mercy upon me! I have sinned; but I am your son!'

But Agave, possessed, saw in a lurid light a fierce hostile animal, a fiendish creature that threatened all that was holy, now becoming a lion snarling repeatedly with yellowed teeth. Fearlessly, she gripped the creature's right limb between paw and shoulder, and put her left foot against his ribs, and, twisting, yanking, twisting again, with strength as if god-given, she gradually, ignoring the strange shrieks from the wild animal, ripped its arm away from its shoulder, so that blood sprayed her face. Ino was helping her on its other side, tearing at its flesh; and now Autonoe joined them, and soon the whole pack of women. There was a single combined continuous discordant maelstrom of noise: the victim shrieking in protracted agony while the women howled in ecstatic triumph. His blood sprayed to right and left from ripped arteries. Soon, one woman was carrying a limp dripping arm; another held a red-stained foot with the sandal still on it. Clawing hands tore at flesh, ripping it back, gradually stripping the ribs clean. Every hand was thickly red with blood; and they were tossing and catching, to and fro, pieces of the body of the creature, now silenced at last.

Its body finally lay scattered. Some pieces were on and near the rocks, some in the deep green woods. As for its head: his mother is proudly carrying it. She has fixed it on the point of her thyrsus and

carries it down from the mountain-side, leaving her sisters dancing exultantly with the Maenads.

She enters Thebes, stumbling over and through the rubble of the east gate, and approaches the palace, shouting to Dionysus as her fellow-hunter, calling him her partner in the kill, her comrade in the victory.

Many people were attracted by her deranged shouting. She saw the white palace portico ahead, shimmering brilliantly in the sunshine. The beast's head on the end of her thyrsus was heavy. She smiled with joy at her achievement, smiled at the people who drew back as she proceeded, the people who responded in such a strange way, not joining her joy at all. In the palace, weary, her gown torn and drenched with blood, she deposited the head on the ground and reclined on a sofa.

She dozed, and at last awoke: sober, sane, hung-over, brain throbbing. Cadmus faced her; and a group of courtiers stood lamenting and wailing around – around not the beast at all, but a horror, a head – the head of –

‘Pentheus!’, she shrieked, starting up: ‘Pentheus, O Pentheus!’

Cadmus wiped tears from his face. ‘You killed him: you and your sisters. You killed him in the ill-fated region where Actaeon was torn by his own hounds. Pentheus went there, spying on Dionysus and your frenzied rites: everyone on the hillside was possessed by the god.’

Her face was distorted with horror. ‘Dionysus,’ she said, bewildered. ‘Dionysus. He has destroyed us. Yet it was a lion I killed, surely. I saw the lion.’

‘The lion was your own son. You have murdered your own son! Pentheus was the head of the royal house. Never again will he embrace me as his grandfather. Now there is only misery for me, suffering for you, tears for your mother, and torment for all our family.’

Dionysus the god appears at the doorway. He resembles the arch-priest but speaks with harshly passionate authority:

‘I came to Thebes, to punish the impious folly that ruled there. Pentheus deserved shameful death, and that he has received. Agave

and her sisters must leave Thebes today: it offends piety that hands so defiled should take part in the city's sacrifices. Cadmus: you and your wife Harmonia shall endure long years of exile. Zeus ordained all this. I leave you to brood on your woes. As for the government of the city: my priests will see to that. Piety has prevailed.'

Proudly, Dionysus turns and goes, leaving Cadmus and Agave embracing, weeping.

---

In the streets, several priests had organised teams of workers, who, with wheelbarrows and spades, were clearing the rubble and making the blocked streets passable again. Meanwhile, at the palace, a delegation of priests took control. They made an inventory of valuables, and took charge of the keys of the treasury. At a long meeting, presided over by the arch-priest of Dionysus, they drafted the new laws of the theocratic city-state, and arranged for them to be promulgated. Draconian laws for impiety were imposed.

'The era of decadence is over', concluded the arch-priest. 'It evoked the wrath of Zeus, who sent the earthquake. At last the era of piety and sanctity is restored.'

The next afternoon, Dionysus the arch-priest stood in the portico of the palace, conferring with some followers about taxation to be imposed to pay for reconstruction. A freckled youth stepped from behind a fluted column, rapidly took aim with his bow and released the string. The arrow hit Dionysus in the back, low down. He stumbled and sat. With one hand he reached back and pulled at the arrow; it broke off, leaving the head embedded in the flesh. Two of his followers had chased the youth, but he had mounted his bay horse and galloped off, leaving them standing breathless in the street.

Dionysus felt waves of giddiness and darkness. He guessed that the arrowhead might be poisoned. The distraught followers laid him on robes in the shade of a pillar.

'Listen', he said. 'I, the priest, am expendable. The god Dionysus lives perpetually. In course of time, he will choose another arch-priest, then another. There is no end. The religion is immortal. I am just... I....'

In a paroxysm of pain, he vomited, and the brown and orange bitty vomit spattered his chest and shoulder.

He coughed repeatedly, took a deep breath and tried to speak.

‘I.... I....’

He was silent, and his stare became fixed. His breathing became slow and harsh. Eventually, after a long struggling breath, he ceased.

---

Late in the afternoon, Polycles and Cassandra were seated on the grass by the shallow river that flowed, clear and sparkling, near Polycles’ vineyard. He embraced her, cautiously at first, and she turned, holding him tightly; and they kissed. They shared new-found trust and contentment. The cicadas chirruped, and a cool breeze softened the sun’s heat.

Later, her freckled son came riding in, and told them of his deed. They arranged for him to stay with a distant relative, far from Thebes, so that no searchers would find him.

And me, the one-eyed former guard? Polycles welcomed me, and I work now as his estate manager, making the work-force more efficient, and improving the irrigation, so that the vines are more productive than ever. I wear a neat cloth patch over the unsightly eyehole.

I often think about King Pentheus. So he was dead, torn apart. Agave his mother became utterly deranged, beyond help, first confined, then sent with an escort to Illyrium, to live guarded by doctors and servants. Cadmus and Harmonia, too, left Thebes, to live in retirement in Illyrium and await peace in the grave. Me, I’m safe. At least until the next incursion. Trouble is, you never know when the next will be. And their supporters are growing.

Pentheus saw order versus disorder, the rational versus the irrational. But that way violence lies. Seems to me there has to be compromise. Part of the time, we have to allow the irrational. Hold it back too tight, and it bursts out explosively. Me, these days, I pour a libation to Aphrodite and to Athene, to Demeter and to Artemis. Yes, even, sometimes, to Dionysus. At night, Anteia serves me well.

She's one of Polycles' staff at this great vineyard. And she doesn't drink wine.

---

29

*'It's a Wrap!'*

**A Novella**

### **1. The Eureka Moment.**

Sunset Court, Holland Road, Hove: Saturday, 8 May 2010.

John Green, Emeritus Professor of English Literature, University of Sussex, aged 73, flopped onto his back, and reclined, naked, panting, indeed wheezing, beside the equally naked form of Jean Shipway, his partner, who was also rather breathless.

The dishevelled bed took up most of the space in the small room; the walls decorated with framed floral prints and patchwork designs. She was 75, but (as he lugubriously jested) looked not a day over 74.

He felt mildly triumphant, and somewhat relieved that his heart still seemed to be coping with such sustained exertions.

'It's a wrap', she gasped. Relaxing, she adjusted her knees carefully: the titanium knee-joints were still a little awkward, though it was more than a year since her NHS surgical operation. With the long varnished nails of her thumb and forefinger, she delicately deleted a pubic hair from her tongue. She reflected that, in her case, the pleasures of clitoral foreplay were far more intense than the

rough joy of a sound shagging; yet for subtle pleasure, little could beat that sense of oral relief and freedom when at last a pubic hair, tangled in teeth and irritating the tongue, could at last be removed. She reflected: 'The removal of such an elusive irritant exposes and magnifies (briefly as positive pleasure) the taken-for-granted absence of displeasure provided by a mouth free from a wiry entanglement.' And that pleasure was now augmented by her pleasure at her own phrasing of the matter. She had worked for many years in the English section of Dillon's bookshop in central London.

He said (to her, though he appeared to be addressing the ceiling), 'In spite of the prostate cancer, I can still manage it; so far at least.' Then, frowning: "'It's a wrap", did you say?'

'Yes, it's what they yell on film-sets when a take has gone well. Finished at last. Wrapped up.'

The frown intensified, then suddenly vanished, and his eyes opened wide: 'Eureka!'

'What? What now?'

'Our financial troubles are over! Wrap – wrappers – dust-wrappers!'

Later, they sat drinking tea in the warm little lounge of their flat in the 'Sunset Court' block of 'retirement homes' in Hove. Usually, they compared worries.

Her list: friends in the same block who were becoming more absent-minded or deaf or incompetent or incontinent; the rising prices of food in the Tesco shop; trying to manage on her pension, dieting for her diabetes, the slowly-maturing cataract in her left eye, understanding the faulty laptop.

His list: at the top, health, of course: particularly his recently-diagnosed prostate cancer, due to be treated by radiation at the Royal Sussex County Hospital in the coming months. John's second main worry, as usual, money: gas bill up 19 per cent, electricity up 10 per cent; insurance costs up. And (in response to promptings by the government, it seemed) the university pension was going to have its annual increases calculated on the basis of the CPI, not the RPI, as in previous years. The Retail Price Index gave an accurate account of

inflation; the Consumer Price Index gave a markedly lower rate; so year by year the pension (taxed at 20%) was being eroded. And even the CPI now said that the inflation-rate had risen to 5.1%

And his newspaper uttered doom and gloom. This paper was the *Daily Telegraph* – sign of his age. Long ago as a student he'd taken the *Daily Worker*; and while teaching, he'd subscribed to the *Guardian*. He soothed his conscience now by saying that he was an 'ironic' reader of the *Telegraph*; but, as time passed, the ironic sense faded, imperceptibly but doggedly, like the fading of a sun-tan from a naturally pallid face. That week, the *Telegraph* was full of reports of corruption and waste: two Russian oligarchs, both richer than the Bank of Croesus, were battling each other at the Old Bailey over 3.5 billion dollars. The eight-year old Afghan War – a futile business, as Rudyard Kipling could have told the government, if its ministers ever read literature – had claimed yet more young victims and more millions of pounds. Then, in spite of all their zealous endeavours to conceal the fact, members of parliament – not a few, but almost all of them – had been exposed by the *Telegraph* as tax fiddlers on a vast scale. Again and again, whatever their party or age or declared policies, members were united on one platform: together they agreed to cheat the taxpayer wherever possible by claiming for this, that and the other. Everything from bath plugs to porn movies, from expensive restaurants to mortgages that in fact had been paid off. Meanwhile, convicted terrorists were using taxpayer's money to fight attempts to have them deported from England to their distant homelands.

Then there was the National Debt. The paper's economics columnist said that in 2008/9 it was £581 billion, by 2011/12 it would be £940 billion, and by 2015/16 it would be £1,500 billion. So merely the interest on the debt would rise from £31 billion in 2009 to £67 billion in 2011. The Bank of England, in its wisdom, was printing money again – 'quantitative easing' – which would add to inflation, and put up prices, and make John and Jean feel further victimised. Share prices were plummeting, and on retirement from the University at the age of 65, John had taken an experienced financier's advice, subsequently proven idiotic, to invest heavily in



shares. Now, whether it was Antofagasta (minerals, a ‘prudent’ punt) or Thornton’s (chocolates, a sentimental punt – John had a sweet tooth), shares were tumbling: by the minute, his invested cash was evaporating – as Prospero had said (in, as John recalled them, the tremulously-melodic melancholy tones of Gielgud), ‘into air, into thin air’. He recalled his Aunt Alice, who, in the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties, had declined to claim her old-age pension: she said she could manage without it, and, by not claiming it, she proudly added, she was reducing the National Debt.

‘I never thought I’d use the old cliché, but now the country’s really going to the dogs’, he would say.

‘You keep saying it, and you’re turning into an old Tory’, she would reply patiently, looking at him over the tops of spectacles that seemed always to be halfway down her nose.

But today, in the cramped warm flat, he was elated.

He read to her a print-out of the email he’d received from Keith Kite at the Kite Antiquarian Bookshop in Lewes. Their friendship had lasted for than three decades, during which John had made modest purchases of first editions to help with his scholarly research.

‘Listen to this one’, he said to Jean.

‘Kite writes: “You asked about Graham Greene’s *Rumour at Nightfall*. As you’ll recall, after *The Name of Action* and *Rumour at Nightfall* were published, Greene turned against them. He forbade reprints. So there are only first editions of these books. They have never been reprinted anywhere, and never will be, as long as Greene is in copyright, which will be for more than forty years to come.

*The Name of Action* sold only around 2,000 copies. For *Rumour at Nightfall*, the printing was about 2,500, and it was badly reviewed, so only about 1200 sold. The other copies were probably pulped. On the net, copies of *Rumour* are for sale at between £495 and £1300. At the moment, I have a rather tatty copy without a dust-wrapper, priced at £600. But in my safe, as an investment with my retirement in mind, I have a better copy with a very good dust-wrapper, worth about £50,000. And the way business is going at the moment, I might have to sell it off sooner than I wanted to.

As for *Brighton Rock*, which you also enquired about: For the U.K. first edition, 1938, without dust-wrapper, about £600 if in very good condition, i.e. no library stamps or anything horrible. In a decent dust-wrapper, £70,000 – that’s what one went for (including commission) recently.”

‘So?’

‘Don’t you see?’, said John. ‘The paper dust-wrapper turns a £600 book into perhaps a £50,000 or £70,000 book. In the USA, Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby*, first edition, fetches 3,500 dollars, but Keith told me that one with a dust-wrapper sold at Bonham’s in New York in 2009 for 182,000 dollars. Harrington’s in London have a first without wrapper at £5,000, with wrapper – £120,000.’

‘Go on...’

‘In Bangkok, that old crook Fang Lee can forge anything. Remember that *Encyclopaedia Britannica* CD I bought from him donkey’s years ago?’

‘Lovely holiday. Such friendly people. Naughty man, though. And I don’t think you should have bought that CD. Defrauding honest people.’

‘But that forged CD worked perfectly. It even came with a forged Certificate of Authenticity, bar-code and all. See?’

‘You’re not thinking of forged *dust jackets*? You couldn’t... could you?’

‘Call it “quantitative easing”. It’s as near to a victimless crime as you can find these days. Everyone’s happy. And we become rich.’

‘Victimless crime? I’m ashamed of you, John. That’s an oxymoron.’

‘Not so, not so. Think of Wise.’

‘Ernie? Partner of Morecambe?’

‘Don’t be obtuse. I meant Thomas J. Wise, bibliographer and forger. In the 1960s, at Sotheby’s, Wise’s forgeries of first editions actually sold for more than the real thing. Being forgeries by a notorious old fraud, they had *cachet*; they were talking points, party novelties. His forgery of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and Matthew Arnold’s poem *Alaric at Rome* went for

about a thousand pounds each – and that was in the 1960s, so think what they'd fetch now! I'll contact Keith about it.'

'Have another cup of tea', she said; 'and don't get over-excited. You don't want to give yourself a stroke.'

## **2. Traditional Skills Maintained.**

An alley off Sukhumvit Road, Bangkok. 30 October 2011.

In his untidy office at the end of the noisy upstairs workshop, Fang Lee Kuan, boss of Kuan Printing, inspected the newly-printed dust-wrappers carefully.

He had scanned them and copied them onto the huge flat electronic screen before him, and now he magnified the picture so as to inspect the detail, particularly the edges of the design and lettering. *Rumour at Nightfall*, said the wrapper.

The work was good, no doubt about it. Working from a genuine jacket posted from England, the workshop (well equipped with a range of traditional printing presses in addition to laser printers and photocopiers) had produced ten facsimiles. Duplicating the original design and type had been challenging, but well within Lee's range of expertise. No watermark was needed. Getting hold of fairly thick paper stock of the exact poundage and quality required had taken some intricate research, numerous phone-calls to printers and publishers, and eventually a circuitous journey in his Toyota pick-up truck through the streets off Sukhumvit, where scooter-riders and tuk-tuk drivers wove their way past the crowded buses and yellow-and-green taxis. But, at a paper warehouse heaped with stock old and new, he found perfectly appropriate sheets.

The trick now was to distress the wrappers, subtly and gently. Some tea-staining, a little dampening and mild creasing here and there, perhaps a touch of induced foxing: he knew the arts. After further inspection, they were passed to the most junior of his staff, Yong Yoobang-yang, a sad-faced local lad aged sixteen, who minded the shop downstairs. When he had no customers to deal with, Yong was

given the tedious task of merely folding and unfolding the wrappers repeatedly until, thinning at those folds, they gained the fragile easy loose flexibility and the softness of texture that normally come with years of use. Then he packed and posted them.

DVDs, passports and degree certificates were Fang Lee's usual specialities. These book-wrappers were a new sideline; almost a hobby; a challenge to his perfectionism. (His Chinese ancestors had included famous calligraphers.) At nearly 10,000 baht a time, it seemed to pay reasonably well. Yet he needed to do some more research: how much profit was the Englishman making from these skilled labours? Of course the wrappers would make an old book look prettier; of course they would protect it. But Fang Lee knew that no English bibliophile would normally take the trouble to have the wrappers printed on the other side of the world. And John had specified that the wrappers should look slightly discoloured and mildly worn with age, to match the condition of Kite's original. Fang lit a Camel cigarette, inhaled deeply, and brooded.

Outside in the alley, a warm light drizzle fell. It was a humid day, and at a nearby drain-cover a rat was carefully chewing a piece of maggoty meat. Being a Bangkok rat, big and streetwise, it ignored the motor-scooters that whined and rattled past.

### **3. Sunset Court, Hove. December 1.**

Keith Kite and John Green sat side by side, comparing the genuine dust-wrapper of *Rumour at Nightfall* with one of the ten that had arrived from Bangkok. John was studying the type with a magnifying-glass.

'Brilliant', said Keith. 'The colours in Fang's versions are a shade brighter, but the difference is hardly noticeable. If you didn't have the original to compare, you wouldn't guess it's not the original.'

'The type in the wording seems to be an exact match. The only difference in the new wrappers that I register is that they still feel a bit harder than the originals. I'll give them all a bit more rubbing and handling. But they'll pass muster.'

‘We’re in business, then.’

‘Yes, but get rich slowly – Nostromo’s motto.’

Keith recalled only that *Nostromo* was a Conrad title; and John, hands trembling with excitement, did not recognise how ill-omened was his allusion to the thief who met lethal poetic justice.

That evening, John and Jean celebrated with a bottle of Spanish wine at the Brunswick pub. It was the night of the free jazz jam session. Anyone could get up and join the resident trio. That night the guests included two passable vocalists, an aged trumpeter who had played with big bands in the nineteen fifties but who now had clearly lost his lip, and – remarkably – the great Jon Altman (virtuoso instrumentalist, famous composer) playing soprano sax with soaring eloquence and imperious command. In his hands the sax looked like a child’s toy but emitted glorious music, fast and fluent as a soaring skylark. It harmonised with John’s elation.

#### **4. Back at Bangkok.**

Fang Lee frowned, looking down out of the rear window to where, in the humid street, a rat, seated on a drain-grid, ignored the occasional passer-by as it gnawed avidly a yellowing piece of rancid fat. As he watched the rat, brown water started to ooze lazily through the drain-grid. Other parts of Bangkok were being inundated by the unprecedented floods spreading from the north, and newspapers warned of continuing rains and flooding; but Mr Lee was confident that his part of the city would not be in danger: he was a quarter of a mile from the nearest canal and a mile from the wide Chao Phraya river.

Orders from Hove in England were increasing steadily. More and more book-wrappers were required. Mr Lee lit a cigarette, reflected for a while, and then decided to carry out a technical experiment.

#### **5. The business in Lewes.**

Lewes High Street must be one of the most attractive High Streets in the country. Graham Greene's first novel, *The Man Within*, celebrates it. As you look down it from the west, the mixture of buildings includes the beamed 15th-Century Bookshop, always seeming at the point of collapse; there are picturesque and impressive buildings dating from the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries; on the left you can see the gatehouse of the ancient castle; and further along there's the venerable White Hart Hotel opposite the law-courts. Tom Payne, champion of democratic liberty, is commemorated here. In the roadway in 1555-7, twenty-four Protestants were burnt at the stake, by order of the Catholic Queen Mary I. And beyond the war-memorial with its winged statue, the street slopes steeply down to the river Ouse overlooked by Harvey's brewery. In the distance, forming a dramatic green backcloth to the vista, is the steep slope of the downs, rising precipitately, looking too suddenly lofty to be plausible.

Keith Kite's second-hand bookshop stood in the mid-part of the High Street. It specialised in rare and valuable books, and John was always welcome there. Keith had been in business for thirty years and had built up an international list of buyers. The economic recession had taken its toll, though, and business had been flagging. He faced stiff competition from two nearby bookshops, Cumming's and the Bow Window shop. The council's rates had increased, and Keith was having some difficulty in paying off the hefty mortgage on his rather beautiful home in Southover High Street, not far from the historic house once owned by Anne of Cleves. Keith recently had become almost crippled by arthritis, and though he was not yet sixty, hobbled about with a stick; to the disgust of his beautiful wife Jane, who was twenty years younger, and had once been entranced by the air of culture he had acquired at Lancing College. His accent had upper-middle-class lucidity, and seemed to imply cultural sophistication and financial amplitude. She had become gradually disillusioned, however. Certainly, finances were a problem. Sex was another. Whether from age, arthritis or depression, Keith no longer seemed interested in her abundant charms.

Financially, John's scheme was providential. John provided the bibliographical expertise. Then he and Keith (using what was left of John's savings and an overdraft taken by Keith) shared the costs of buying some first editions with genuine wrappers, and numerous first editions which lacked wrappers. Fang Lee would then print copies of those wrappers, and they would be fitted on to the first editions which lacked them. Keith would advertise a few of the genuine items and fakes in his catalogues, but would sell mainly through a diversity of web-sites, Amazon, AbeBooks, Ebay and so forth, using an assortment of names and addresses. John, Jean and friends in the trade helped out here.

Their prices would be low enough to ensure speedy sales, but not so low as to attract suspicion. And the books would be released in a trickle rather than a flood.

The first of their deceived punters was Mario Corleone, a wealthy American collector in San Francisco who, having years ago lost faith in currencies and shares, was converting cash into tangible aretfacts. He bought from Keith a *Rumour at Nightfall* 'in original dust-wrapper' for \$50,000, and deemed it a bargain.

During the following months, as other first editions in dust wrappers were gradually sold, one by one, John and Keith paid the initial costs and reinvested all the net profits in further purchases of first editions and genuine wrappers; and further copies of wrappers were then produced by Mr Lee.

Gradually the dining-room table at the Hove flat became heaped with stacks of books and wrappers. John and Jean became expert 'distressers'. The Lee jackets, already softened and made loosely flexible by Yong, were carefully rubbed. Occasionally they were given a little crease or two, or a small tear, just to lend variety and the suggestion of the attrition by time.

After shared deductions for costs, including the payments to Fang Lee, Keith took 50% of the net proceeds, as he was doing the advertising and was the main outlet. John took the other netto 50%. After all, it was his idea; and he and Jean did meticulous proof-checking to ensure there were no revealing blunders. (One of Lee's

earliest jackets had omitted a full stop from the blurb on the flap, but Jean had spotted the error at the second reading.)

All three agreed that for the first six months, almost all the profits would be reinvested and the range of titles increased and diversified, to reduce the risk that the number of wrapped first editions of certain titles would look suspiciously large, and to maintain the rarity that ensured high prices. At the end of eighteen months, the racket would stop. By then, at least 500 first editions in dust-wrappers would have been sold: books by Conrad, Greene, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, Agatha Christie, Ian Fleming, Golding, Ian McEwan and others. John was insistent: increasing diversification would ensure that no part of the market would become suspiciously replete with jacketed first editions. By the end of eighteen months, John and Kite would each have made, after all the deductions for purchases of books and genuine jackets, and after the expenses of Fang Lee and the commissions of the websites, and after postage and insurance, about £500,000: a comfortable retirement.

The ethics of the matter troubled Jean, who regularly attended St Nicholas' Church, on the hill overlooking the clock-tower area of central Brighton. She was pleased that John had had his mind taken off his worries about health; indeed, the excitement of the racket (as John anachronistically called the book-wrapper scam) had, in her view, rejuvenated him; but a grey cloud of guilt troubled her conscience. In her prayers she confessed freely, and sought divine guidance.

John, however, felt remarkably untroubled by the matter. His conscience had once been a finely tuned and insistent instrument. Having been brought up by C of E parents, and having attended a C of E primary school and Grammar School, he had formerly been so conscientious that any temporary gain from a small dishonesty was soon outweighed by long-term remorse and bitter self-reproach. Now, however, with age and illness, conscience appeared a burden to be handed to others, to be bravely borne by the sensitively young and the maturely middle-aged.



For such an ailing pensioner, conscience increasingly resembled a superannuated luxury. In a word which he liked to use, relishing the associated irony, conscience was ‘supererogatory’: or, even worse, it was an anachronism in the twenty-first century. If the choice lay between the conscientious and the pragmatic, any bright person these days, whether a banker, politician, schoolteacher or student, would choose the pragmatic. (He briefly imagined a plump Lucifer seated in a sulphurous office with ‘Ministry of Pragmatism’ on the door.) Perhaps John’s cancer treatment, while inquisitively irradiating his prostate, had lethally irradiated his conscience: thus he mused. Indeed, the fact of the cancer, by making him sense ‘Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near’, had seemed to bring moral lucidity where previously he had been confused by moral ambiguity. Dr Johnson’s bulky frame, smelling of sweat and booze, lurched into his mind: ‘When a man knows that he is to be hanged on the morrow, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.’ Alongside Johnson slunk a black-clad Hamlet murmuring ‘conscience doth make cowards of us all’.

The racket still seemed to him a victimless crime. Everybody gained; everyone was happy. If the fake wrappers were identical to the originals, who could possibly lose? And some of the wrappers were so stylishly attractive that the world was gaining: objects of beauty were being added to collections internationally. With so much ugliness in society, particularly obese people flaunting tattooed and metal-pierced bodies like those of jungly savages, who could complain if, here and there, *objets d’art* multiplied? Art in the service of culture. Beauty enhancing the utilitarian.

‘And you know’, John said to Jean once, ‘We may be benefiting our deluded punters. Even if they eventually find out, they may be better off than if they’d not been cheated. Remember T. J. Wise. Crime *can* pay – can pay even the supposed victims! I’m feeling good about this. Let’s open a bottle of Merlot.’

‘For you, any excuse serves to open a bottle. Remember the old maxim: “Be sure your sins will find you out.”’

But she opened the bottle (Chilean Merlot from Waitrose in Western Road), and they clinked glasses.

‘A toast’, he said. ‘To the reproduction of the rare! Let us bless the world’s remaining bibliophiles!’

## 6. A test.

A new delivery from Fang Lee had arrived at Sunset Court.

‘Look!’, said John to Jean. ‘There’s the original wrapper for Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Special. Legendary. Cost Kite and us £11,000 with the book. And here are the three copies of the wrapper that Fang has mustered.’

At a glance, they looked fine. He admired the good colours of the picture on the front, showing the climactic meeting at Queen Anne’s Gate, where the German impostor would learn Britain’s naval secrets. There, in a red disk boldly superimposed on the picture, was the price: ‘1/-’. One shilling, which translated as five decimal pence, for a book which (with wrapper) would now bring in at least £10,000. He admired the pleasingly archaic type of the advertisement on the back for Blackwood’s ‘Popular Shilling Novels’.

‘They look very attractive’, said Jean, glancing at the colour cover-picture. ‘This novel appeared in war-time, the Great War, didn’t it? So dust jackets would be very very rare.’

‘That’s right. The book was first issued in October 1915. Many copies of the early printings were read by soldiers serving in France, and the paper wrapper didn’t last long in the mud and filth of the trenches and the general hurly-burly of war-time travel. So each of these wrappers adds nearly £10,000 to the price of a good quality first edition.’

Jean was turning over the new version and frowning. ‘But there’s something odd about these’, said Jean. ‘Compared with the original, here, these copies seem a bit too bright and the pictures somehow look different.’

John felt his pulse-rate increase. With a trembling hand, he picked up a wrapper and turned it over.

She was right.

He picked up his big magnifying-glass and studied the picture. He beheld a slight blurring of the edges of the picture-design; and his pulse-rate increased further. John soon realised what he was seeing there: it was the product of inkjet reproduction. Good quality, as such; but not the quality that traditional printing would have presented. Fang had evidently used a large high-end inkjet copier instead of freshly printing the jacket. John put the glass down and reflected. Previous wrappers had been excellent: so why this inferior batch? They would fool a novice, but novices wouldn't make the team rich. He brooded for a while, and then sent a critical email to Fang, threatening to terminate their arrangement unless the former high-quality work was resumed.

In the afternoon, to still his beating mind (like Prospero, he imagined), John walked along the gusty seafront, past the hulk of the ruined West Pier, now no more than a set of iron cages rusting and rotting into the beating waves of the English Channel. Further on, the long low untidy Palace Pier, now known as Brighton Pier. He didn't like the change of name; he clung to tradition like a drowning man to a leaking life-jacket; a link with the literary past was being eroded. He could remember when there was a tall theatre at the pier's far end, a good architectural culmination of the long length of decking, and not this nondescript collection of arcades and rides. Now some developers proposed to construct at the roadside by the pier's entrance a kind of Ferris wheel. One suggested name was 'The Brighton Eye'.

John thought suddenly of Fortune's Wheel, that legendary wheel turned by Dame Fortuna, which, Chaucer said, seemed to govern men's fates, ensuring that the more they sought worldly success, the more they would be subject to her powers: the more the wheel would turn, so that the man who was high in one month could be cast low in another; and the wheel, constantly turning, guaranteed endless change and instability. John thought of Chaucer's Troilus, ecstatically in love, then dismally betrayed. He thought of Chaucer's translation of Boethius, where the way to elude the power of Fortune's Wheel was disclosed: the more you sought worldly goals, the more you were in her power; so the more you set your sights on

Heaven, and held worldly goals in contempt, the more stable your life would be, and the greater your eventual reward. But did the creator of the randy wife of Bath, of the miller and the pardoner, really believe that? Wasn't the Chaucer who relished the joys of this world more convincing than the Chaucer who tried to preach? 'Never trust the artist; trust the tale.' D. H. Lawrence said so.

John shuddered in the October wind from the Channel; and shivered inwardly, too, for the envisaged wheel seemed to mock his notions of safe prosperity ensured by the racket. Another memory came to mind, too. Autumn 1950: the time when his mother had taken him to the Daffodil Cinema near the top of the Promenade (his family lived in Cheltenham then) to see a new film, *The Third Man*. He had been thirteen years old, but in the subsequent decades never forgot that film; he particularly recalled those tense minutes when Orson Welles as Harry Lime, high aloft in the flimsy cabin of the Frater Wheel at Vienna, tempted his friend Holly to join him in his racket – 'tax free, old man, tax free'. Lime: eventually slain by a bullet from Holly's revolver. John tried to erase the image.

## **7. Bangkok.**

Fang Lee Kuan smiled at the indignant email from John.

It confirmed his suspicions. The fact that John had wanted the wrappers to be distressed had shown that John was in the business of selling fakes. But the anger with which John had responded to the use of the inkjet printer proved that John was in the business of selling very expensive fakes.

Lee brooded. A plan formulated itself.

## **8. Distressing Activity at Fang Lee Kuan's Printing Shop, Bangkok, 1 November.**

That morning, with much of the city flooded, Yong Yoobang-Yang had experienced great difficulty in getting from his home half a mile away to the shop.

At places he had waded, sometimes knee-high, through the brown stinking water in which floated litter and all the abominations of Bangkok's sewers: brown turds, bulging condoms, drowned rats, grisly offal from animals. Downstairs at the shop, where his duties included sweeping up first thing in the morning, he found to his dismay that even here there were six inches of water covering the ground floor. The miasmic odour of excrement filled the place. Outside, where a drain was normally visible, its location was marked by a bubbling flow frothing up through the surging lake of filth. On the floor inside, a cardboard box, holding a stack of dustwrappers, was already soaked through and the contents completely sodden. Yong knew this was a valuable stack, and wished he had put it on a high shelf, which he now did, taking out the wet wrappers and laying them beside it in a row to dry. The staining, though apparent to an experienced eye, might be sufficiently light to pass as the patina of ageing. No need for Mr Lee to know. After all, it was Yong who had the job of posting the things to England, carefully packed in neat rectangular parcels.

## 9. Hale's Charms.

Alf Hale, career criminal, or, as he preferred to put it, dealer in *objets d'art*, had spent a voluptuous afternoon with Jane – Mrs Kite. He had first met her at the bookshop in Lewes when he had been seeking to establish the value of some old prints and some ancient books which had come his way. That they had come his way was the outcome of the operations not of providence but of diligence: his son had made a trip to Chichester and had deftly burgled a detached house on the outskirts, taking silverware and these other items.

And it was while Hale was watching Mrs Kite inspecting his wares, holding the prints to the light, and checking the publication-dates of the books, that he had become drawn to her blonde and

buxom charms. It should be said, on his behalf, that having just undergone an unpleasant and expensive divorce, Hale was suffering the pangs of carnal frustration. She, broadminded, was not averse to the occasional extra-marital adventure. As agreed, he called back the next morning, and she agreed to meet him for coffee on a day when her husband was in London on business. Hale could be charming, in a roguish, jolly way; and she had found domestic life and the routine in the bookshop lacking in adventure; so their eventual afternoon in bed was mutually gratifying. And Hale was combining pleasure with business, for he, during his visit, made careful note of the various tempting items in her half-timbered home on Southover High Street.

In bed, he was burly, assertive, sometimes aggressive. Face down, handcuffed to the rails of the bed-head, she writhed in pleasure as he took her from behind, now vaginally, now anally, snarling. 'Yes!', she yelled; 'Do it! More! More!'.

## 10. Kite's Woes.

Keith Kite, standing at his lounge window and looking southwards between rooftops towards the bypass and the green plains beyond, was feeling impatient. Just as the scam started to show big profits, the break-in at his home had shaken his confidence. His home in Lewes had a heavy mortgage; and now his wife had called him at the shop in the High Street and summoned him back, because when she returned from shopping she had found the burglar alarm sounding, a window forced open, and items stolen. Some of her favourite antique jewellery had gone. But so had the parcel that John had brought round. It contained two copies of *Rumour at Nightfall*, ready to be posted to customers, and a batch of wrappers recently arrived from Fang Lee, a package that John had brought over. The whole parcel stank of sewage.

The police had taken three hours to appear; and then a young constable, after inspecting the damage and making notes, had given them a crime number, so that they could make an insurance claim,

and had suggested that as burglaries were so common, they should think themselves lucky that no violence was involved. He departed, after offering little hope that the perpetrator would be caught. 'We're short-staffed, you see', he said. 'Government cuts.'

## **11. Athena House, Ovingdean, near Brighton.**

Alf Hale, career criminal, was pleased with the two additions to his collection of artefacts. In the basement, his superbly-designed strong-room (no windows, no doors, access only by lift from his lounge above) resembled a compact museum and art-gallery. There on the wall, a captive Picasso acrobat in strident colours and a pensive Degas ballerina submitted patiently to their secluded imprisonment. The former was a signed print; the latter, a mere sketch, but an original. Hale had artistic tastes, of a sort.

Alf examined his new acquisitions carefully: two fine copies of *Rumour at Nightfall* in their dust-wrappers. £50,000 each: they could serve as collateral for a drug deal. The result of a Lewes break-in. For big international dealing in drugs, valuable paintings were fine. For smaller local deals, necessary to lubricate the machinery of contacts and the hierarchy of obligation, these rare books seemed ideal. The known value could be easily established from Amazon or Abebooks; they were more portable than paintings or sculptures; and insurers, eager to cut their losses, were more likely to make a quick deal without awkward questions. In the meantime, the bookshelves on either side of his pseudo-Regency fireplace could be graced with these volumes. So he had sent his loyal son to Kite's house. Jane Kite might suspect a connection with her clandestine lover; but, he reasoned, she wouldn't dare mention it, for fear of incriminating herself.

There was one question in the back of Hale's mind. Given the rarity, wasn't it odd that two copies of the same Greene novel had surfaced at the same time? And, as he bent his head over the colourful wrappers, something else seemed strange. He sniffed, and

sniffed again. A distinct odour arose from the paper, an odour reminiscent of foul drains.

He lit a cigarette as a fumigant and turned to the torn package that had also come his way, with the books. On fully opening the rectangular package, he was rewarded by the same insidious stink, which now, unmistakably, was the stink of sewage, the stink of clogged lavatories...

He recoiled in disgust from the stack of printed paper which he drew out onto the table, and beheld, to his bewilderment, ten wrappers for Joyce's *Ulysses*, six for Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, four for Greene's *Stamboul Train*, and four for Kipling's *Stalky and Co.*

## **12. Brighton Eye.**

The Brighton Eye, smaller twin of the London Eye, opened in October 2011. Its wheel was more than fifty yards high: John was too old to reckon in metres.

John, though indignant that there was no discount for pensioners, paid £8 for a journey on it. Its neat oval pods, each with two benches, circulated in a leisurely manner, conveying its occupants to a lofty viewpoint that afforded vistas over the channel to the south; to the west, along the seafront, past Brighton Pier and the rusting skeleton of the West Pier, and along to the solitary chimney of the former Portslade power station. To the east, the view was of the cream-and-white listed frontages of the terraces that extended to Black Rock.

Yes, it brought to mind that Frater Wheel in the film of *The Third Man*, and Orson Welles's Harry Lime trying to tempt Holly Martins, played by Joseph Cotten. John ruminated on the racket and its satisfactory financial rewards. Seagulls soared and reeled about the slowly circulating, quietly creaking wheel.

## **13. A scholarly interlude.**



At prices varying from £200 to £5,000, depending on their condition, their state, and the status of the vendor, Keith Kite had gathered a collection of five first editions of Graham Greene's *Stamboul Train*. They had to be in good-quality bindings. No point putting a wrapper round a cover that looked tatty, as if it had long lacked its protective jacket: that would make any punter suspicious. To go with the wrapper, the covers had to look reasonably clean and bright. That meant paying for the best quality firsts. So the outlay was bigger, but so would be the takings.

'Look', said John. 'This £3,000 volume is worth every penny. The bookseller who sold it to us didn't realise what he'd got. Look, page 77. There: "Q. C. Savory". So this copy is not only the 1932 first edition and not only the first impression, it's the first *state*.'

'Remind me,' said Keith, looking at the screen where he was calculating the takings.

'Big drama. Just as the book was about to go on sale, the publisher got word that J. B. Priestley thought he'd been libelled by the characterisation of the complacent novelist "Q. C. Savory" in the story. So at the last minute, Greene had to phone through changes. On several pages, he changed "Q. C." to "Quin", to make the name less likely to remind people of "J. B." Priestley. So most of the first impression of the book was "Second state", incorporating the change. So hundreds of copies say "Quin". But just a few, perhaps early review copies, got out with the initials unchanged. So they are really rare. At least £5,000 without wrapper. At least £20,000 with. Nice work.'

'*Nice Work*? That's a David Lodge title. No use for us, though,' said Keith. 'Too recent, too big a print-run.'

---

As the months passed, the sales burgeoned, and the assembly-line at Sunset Court filled the dining-room. First editions were stacked high on the table, and John had the sad task of rejecting some of them which, in spite of the descriptions on the web-sites, had covers which looked just a shade too scruffy to be compatible with the wrappers destined for them. Nevertheless, the process of ploughing back the

profits to buy yet more materials had become so successful that, as books came in by post to John and by weekly deliveries from Keith, John was reminded of the old Walt Disney film of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, part of *Fantasia*, where Mickey, having seized the sorcerer's book of spells, tries to control the brooms and buckets, but they get out of control, so, as the enchanted brooms rush to and fro, emptying buckets of water on the floor, he soon becomes wildly afloat, like a desperate mariner on choppy seas, in the seemingly unstoppable flood engulfing the house.

John was now undergoing the radiation treatment for prostate cancer. Sessions on a slab at the Royal Sussex County Hospital on Eastern Road. One week of treatment finished, seven weeks to go: the explanatory brochure warned him that possible 'side-effects' ('base effects' would have been more appropriate) ranged from incontinence to impotence, vile prospects both. So far, however – touch wood or these days touch MDF ('medium density fibreboard') – no sign of either. On the other hand, the hormone pills prescribed for the cancer were already having embarrassing side-effects: he now found that perky little breasts, like an early-teenage girl's, were starting to bulge, sore and sensitive, from his silvery chest-hair. Teiresias in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* came to mind: 'he had experienced love both as a man and as a woman.' John had said to Jean once, 'If you want a heterosexual relationship and a lesbian one combined, I'll soon be able to oblige.'

## 14. An Appointment.

Professor Green picked up the phone and heard a husky cockney voice with a strongly oriental inflection. 'Listen, Professor', said the voice, making 'Professor' sound like 'Pwofessor', 'you're in deep shit. Unless you pay. I want £20,000 cash, in used notes, delivered by hand.'

'What *are* you talking about? Who are you?'

'Call me Mister Chang. But you don't need to know who I am. All that matters is that I know you and your scam. Don't want me to

go to police, do you? Right? I'll give you two weeks to get it together. We meet 2 p.m. on Saturday December 3rd.'

'What? Wait a minute, let me write that down.' John's trembling hand dropped the pen twice before he could start to write. 'But £20,000 –'

'You can find it. I learn fast about old books. You turn up, or else *you* learn fast about *new steel*. 2 p.m., Saturday December 3rd. Somewhere nice and public, where I can see you good and clear; but somewhere nice and private too, where I can check you've brought it all. Know where? A lucky place. The Brighton Eye. Lovely new ride. I want to ride there. Bring the money in a bright red holdall. Got that? Bright red.'

'How will I recognise you?'

'That's easy. I look Chinese and I'll carry another red holdall. Be there.' The line went dead.

John slumped, trembling, sweat prickling his face and armpits. He felt giddy. Then he poured himself a gin and tonic, swigged half of it, and anxiously phoned Kite.

## **15. Good News, Bad News.**

Hale, with his loyal son Darren at his side, kept his fat thumb on the bell-push until at last Kite came hobbling to the door. 'Yes?' said Kite, puzzled by the sight of two unfamiliar visitors, and still a little dazed by the interruption. He had been re-reading one of his favourite 'Stalky & Co' stories by Kipling, 'Slaves of the Lamp', and in imagination had been fighting in India alongside Stalky and his comrades.

Hale said 'Ask us in nicely, now, Mr Kite.'

Kite looked at the grinning Hale, all six feet four of him, and the glowering Darren, and asked them in nicely.

'Now,' said Hale, sprawling in an armchair which seemed to shrink under his bulk. 'First the good news, then the bad news. We have good news for you. Some of your lost properties have come into our possession. But now, here's the fucking bad news, excuse

my French: you're gonna have to pay a nice reward to get them back...'

Ten minutes later, after the bad news had been carefully and emphatically imparted to the appalled and trembling Kite, and arrangements for the reward had been made, the visitors left, and climbed into their big Audi with the number plate HELL 0.

'Think this man of his will deliver?', said Darren.

'Sure', said Hale. 'Kite's shit-scared. Funny choice of place he wants for the delivery, though. But it suits me. We'll watch, make sure his Chinese delivery-guy is solo. If he's solo, I'll go in to collect. You, just keep back and watch; make sure it's not some kind of set-up. '

Darren grinned. He carried a small automatic, a compact Glock 22. So far, in his role as bodyguard to his dad, he'd found that he didn't even need to fire it; just showing it was enough to make people flinch and back off.

## **16. The Influence of Kipling.**

'Thank the Lord for "Slaves of the Lamp"', said Kite. 'That'll keep them off our backs for now.'

'Only for a week!', said John. 'But then, when they get together and realise the trick, they'll surely come after both of us.'

'If that happens', said Kite, 'We'll just have to go to the police and own up. The point is that meanwhile, we've got time to stow away the profits so they can't be found. Use relatives' bank accounts, that sort of thing. A judge wouldn't jail us: we're both too respectable and you're too old. Moderate fines and suspended sentences.'

'I told Jean', said John. 'She's worried. Very worried. Wants to tip off the police about the meeting at the Eye. She doesn't want any violence there.'

'Tell her not to. Tell her to stay out of it. That's best.'

'Well, she has a powerful conscience', said John. 'She even wants us to declare the profits to the income tax people. But I'll bribe her:

we fancy a package holiday somewhere warm in January. A nice all-inclusive holiday with a bit of cultural interest. Cunninghame Graham country. Morocco. Could be our last holiday for quite a while.'

'I'm worried. No, scared. Perhaps we shouldn't have got into this.'

'Well, at least I feel I'm alive again. Before the scam, I was sinking into decrepitude. But I worry for Jean, because she worries.'

## **17. Buddhism.**

Chang was a lapsed Buddhist. Greatly lapsed, his parents might have said. His home now lay in the Chinese area of Brixton, and there he had learnt to survive by guile and, where necessary, violence. A little man, barely five feet three, he had found that a razor-sharp flick-knife tended to compensate satisfactorily for his lack of stature. He was a proficient debt-collector for a landlord whose patron saints were St Rachman and St Hoogstraten.

If Chang was not a devout Buddhist, he was superstitious, and his superstition was haunted by the rich iconography of Buddhism. The legendary great wheel, for instance, rolled at times into his dreams and daydreams: the 8-strut wheel which represented the great cycle of life, and which brought to mind the rays of the sun and its recurrence. To him, a wheel generally meant good luck. If his experiences at roulette had not always vindicated the belief, he felt that this was merely a postponement of the great good fortune which would eventually come his way.

## **18. The Wheel Turns.**

1.59 on Saturday December 3rd. 2011.

At the Brighton Eye, there was an untidy queue. This was a cold day, but bright, with some sunshine; so visibility from the Eye would be good.

A small man with Chinese features visible beneath the raised hood of his anorak, clutching a red holdall, stood impatiently. Hale, also holding a red sports bag, pushed into the queue and stood beside him. 'Hey, there's a queue here', said a plump woman indignantly, pushing her two children closer to them.

'Darling, this gentleman has been saving my place,' said Hale, lowering his face to hers, so that his acrid breath made her flinch, while his evil grin made her step back and clutch the children to her sides. 'Haven't you, Mister Chang?'

Lee's man Chang nodded dourly.

The wheel halted, and Hale and Chang entered a pod, sitting opposite each other on the plastic seating. After a long pause, other pods slid into place to be filled with customers, the wheel moving and stopping, moving and stopping. Then the wheel began its great slow rotation, and Chang and Kite were lifted slowly above Madeira Drive and the Pier. To a poetic eye, the Brighton wheel might have seemed a great handleless clock-face milling time into eternity. In Hale's view, it was a handy spot for the completion of a transaction. To Chang, it was the ideal conjunction of business and pleasure: a truly propitious wheel.

Across Marine Drive, on the terrace facing the wheel, Darren kept careful watch, as instructed, using a compact pair of Japanese prismatic binoculars. Behind him glittered the twinkling lights of a slot-machine arcade; further along stood a neon-lit Burger King. Before him, a panoramic view: Brighton Pier, then, as he swung the binoculars leftwards, the wheel, then a fish-and-chip cafe, a 'Crazy Golf' course, and the Aquarium Station for Volk's electric railway – 'The Oldest Electric Railway in the World'.

Having received lessons in tolerance at his comprehensive school, he did not share his father's antiquated and stereotypical view that people of oriental stock were devious and cunning. No, being an unsentimental materialist, Darren merely held all foreigners in England to be surplus to requirements: they took jobs that were hard

enough for locals to find. This was a mere matter of arithmetic: if ten jobs were available, and two of them went to foreigners, two locals were out of work.

About eight minutes later, the wheel slowed and gradually halted. The smart white and grey steel-and-plastic pod containing Chang and Hale had dutifully completed three leisurely circuits and smoothly stopped at the exit platform. The door slid open, and Chang, still hooded, scurried out past the attendant, Hale's bag in one hand, his other hand holding some bloodstained tissues to his nose, which appeared to be broken.

In the pod that Chang had hastily left, the burly Hale seemed reluctant to leave. He sat in a relaxed posture, looking skywards with unblinking eyes, as if fascinated by the windblown cloud. He ignored the empty red holdall by his feet. His mobile phone played repetitively a bar of aggressive music, but Hale seemed not to hear; nor was he troubled by a spreading red stain on his shirt-chest beneath the camel-hair overcoat. Apparently entranced by the grey heavens, he certainly retained no worldly concerns.

---

Using one of the special parking permits which his uncle (Fang Lee) in Bangkok reproduced so easily, Chang had parked his Toyota truck on Madeira Drive in a 'disabled' bay quite close to the great wheel. He climbed in quickly, heaved the red bag on to the front passenger seat, and (always deftly careful) had just fitted his seatbelt, when the passenger door opened and a distraught Darren leaned in, pointed the wobbly pistol at his chest and fired.

Chang felt the impact like a jab with a hot stick, but reflexively grabbed the pistol in his left hand and yanked, so that Darren overbalanced and started to topple in, but Darren's fall was checked as Chang's knife jabbed into his throat, was retracted, and then slashed his carotid artery. Darren slumped, his spurting blood drenching the upholstery and the floor-carpet. Chang pushed him away hard, so that he fell back out and down into the gutter. Then Chang started the car, feeling growing waves of pain from his chest, veered out from the parking bay into Madeira Drive, and headed for

the eastern exit onto the coast road, where the traffic was busy. The pain made the vista ahead undulate and blur.

Chang's car rapidly passed Constable Parkin, who for twenty minutes had sat at the wheel of his unmarked car on Madeira Drive, a hundred yards east of the great wheel. Some female crank, an old biddy with a posh voice, had phoned the Brighton police station to say she feared that there might be a fracas at the Brighton Eye around 2 p.m., and Parkin had been told to vary his circuit in order to have a look. His radio crackled. 'One IC3 male, around 6 ft 3 inches, one IC4 male, around 5 ft 2.' Parkin, snug in the warm car, felt no great inclination to leave it to make enquiries. Besides, he was reaching the end of a new thriller by Peter James, that popular local author, and, enthralled, he wanted to see how the fictional police sleuth, Inspector Grace, would succeed in running down the killer. So it was with annoyance that he received the further crackling message: 'The Wheel. Report of an injured IC3. What do you see?'

'Nothing much. Oh yes, there are some folks milling around along there. Bravo Alpha one zero one.'

He dropped the paperback, put the car into gear, and drove towards the ticket office at the base of the towering circle.

Behind him, well out of his sight, a black Toyota truck had veered to the side of the drive, slowed, and hit a lamp-post. An airbag instantly ballooned from the hub of the steering-wheel, receiving punctiliously the face and upper body of the Asiatic driver. He apparently found the airbag comforting, for he did not move. Eventually, when an ambulance arrived, the crew found that his position resembled that of someone who, trying to peer intently into the bag, as if to fathom its mystery, had then become paralysed. But, the little bullet having fulfilled its pressing destiny, there was nothing the crew could do to break the spell which bound Chang to eternity.

---

The police file on the three deaths would remain open, but the regime of severe financial cuts which prevailed at that time meant that the search for the causes could never be pursued with assiduity, and soon other matters gained precedence. In any case, the three



deaths were certainly cost-effective, when the long-term benefits to the British taxpayer were taken into account. The eventual Inquest made evident that all three of the deceased men had criminal records. At the police station, the stored evidence included a bag found on the floor of Chang's car. It contained old books and numerous dust-wrappers; but they stank so foully that eventually, in the interests of hygiene, the bag (with a little help from the tidy-minded) was enabled to become peripatetic, and was then consigned to a large black wheelie-bin and thereafter to the chaotic landfill site at Newhaven, where the big raucous scavenging seagulls glided and swooped. To some observers of the wheeling birds, they resembled doves of peace; to others, vultures.

## **19. Holiday.**

January 2012. The Clubhotel Riu Tikida Dunas, Agadir, Morocco.

John and Jean reclined on sun-loungers by the largest of the four pools, sipping their cocktails. The bright sun glistened on the water. Beyond, across the Boulevard, lay the immense sandy beach with its Atlantic breakers rolling in. To the north, the casbah on its rocky heights looked down serenely. The heights were inscribed in white with the vast Arabic slogan which meant, 'For Allah, King and Country.'

John was re-reading *Stamboul Train* in a cheap paperback reprint. Its icy Subotica made Agadir seem even more soothingly balmy.

'This is heavenly', said Jean. Then, after a thoughtful pause: 'But promise me we're finished with book-dealing.'

'Well,' he said, 'The scam has come to a close, but Keith has paid off his debts, and we've got our nest-egg; and we'll have had this holiday to remember it by. All inclusive.'

'Not exactly the victimless crime', said Jean, frowning. Before Christmas, she had learnt about the deaths of Chang, Hale and Hale's son Darren from the pages of the Brighton *Argus*.

‘My dear, don’t start on that tack again. Just say to yourself, the absence of those three rogues makes the world a better place. So it’s better than a victimless crime. And at the very least, we have saved them from that dreaded decline, so eloquently evoked in Jaques’ “seven ages of man” speech, when they might be “Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything’. But you can pray for their souls, if you like. Graham Greene would have liked that. Meanwhile, tomorrow, for us, a coach-trip to the souks of Taroudant—the pink-walled city that the intrepid Cunninghame Graham failed to reach.’

## 20. Postscript.

In San Francisco, in a lofty lavish apartment not far from the Sears Tower, Mario Corleone, that wealthy lawyer and bibliophile, was admiring his first edition of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* in its still-colourful wrapper. The book was both an investment and a pleasure to see and handle. The bibliophile’s dream. Even the brownish discoloration of the endpapers was part of its historic character; like the cobwebs on a bottle of vintage wine. The rear flap bore a quaint boxed advertisement for the works of Ian Hay (who the hell was he?). Idly but delicately, the connoisseur lifted that flap, which had the reassuringly frail softness of old age, as it should. Both endpapers were free from blemishes, though naturally they were discoloured, very light brown with age. Evenly discoloured. The apt mellowing of a century-old classic.

*Evenly* discoloured?

He took down from a nearby shelf his first edition of Wells’s *Anne Veronica*, opened the rear cover and studied the endpapers. On the endpaper facing the flap, the light brownish discolouration extended only halfway across. Where the flap had pressed when the book was closed, the endpaper was whitish, or at least more cream than light brown, having enjoyed greater protection from air and discoloration.

He picked up *The Thirty-Nine Steps* again, and frowned. The endpapers, by their light but even browning, mutely accused the dust-wrapper of being a later arrival; much later.

His anger growing, he rummaged for the receipt (for payment of twenty thousand dollars) headed by the address of Keith Kite, Antiquarian Book Dealer, High Street, Lewes, East Sussex, England. Nobody cheated Corleone and got away with it. Mario felt the litigious itch growing. This Kite would be brought down to earth: hard.

---

### 30

#### **Angry Elegy for Dylan Thomas**

‘Do not go gentle into that good night’,  
Said Thomas, dead of booze at 39;  
‘Rage, rage, against the dying of the light’,  
Advised the man who, speechless, gave no sign;  
Was lastly diagnosed with swollen brain,  
Pneumonia, fatty liver; slave to drink.  
‘Rage, rage’: futile advice; and here’s the pain:  
Last week my partner was assessed (just think  
Of implications) with... dementia.

That slew my rhyme-scheme, and it will

Slay all her patterns: a lethargic blade  
To shred the shrinking brain; the long-drawn kill  
Denies all dignity, makes mind degrade.

The poet talked as if we had a choice;  
But the approach to death takes choice away.  
‘Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything’:  
Yes, Shakespeare got it right, I’m sad to say.

And what was Dylan’s boast? ‘I’ve had eighteen  
Straight whiskies. That’s the record’: I reflect,  
‘In folly, yes.’ ‘Rage, rage?’ I do at him,  
By drink, by steroid, morphine sulphate, wrecked;  
Gone comatose and speechless to his night;  
What’s ‘good’ about it? He, still young,  
Surrendered, fell in silence, knew no sight  
Of any sunset’s ‘dying of the light’.

But who am I to judge? In my long life  
I’ve caused deaths and inflicted cruel pains;  
And Dylan’s passing, clouded, without strife,  
May yet have granted him subliminal gains.  
(So may she find at last, beyond the mind.)  
Perhaps, while stupor stood on guard,  
Without a plaint or pang,  
Sheer glory flared; with joy unmarred  
Soul clapped its hands and sang.

---

**Charles Baudelaire:**

**Autumn Song**

We soon will plunge into the cold shadow-lands:  
Farewell, bright light of our too-short summer days!  
Already I hear the funereal shocks of the logs'  
Reverberant thuds on the courtyards' paving-stones.

Again the whole winter will enter my being, with wrath,  
Hatred, and shivering, horror, and hard and forced labour;  
And, like the sun consigned to his polar hell,  
My heart will be no more than a red ice-lump.

Trembling, I hear the thump of each log that drops;

When they build the scaffold, no echo is duller than this.  
My spirit resembles a tower which cracks and crumbles  
Beneath the untiring bangs of the battering-ram.

It seems to me, rocked by monotonous shocks,  
That someone is hastily nailing together a coffin.  
For whom? – Yesterday, summer; today, it's the autumn!  
The mysterious noise resounds as a long goodbye.

## 32

### Iago's Motive

**'Demand me nothing; what you know, you know;  
From this time forth, I never will speak word.'**

He never did, though tortured by all means  
That Lodovico zealously enforced.  
Of course he could not, for it is a law  
Of onomastic motivation that  
Its subject cannot know its servitude.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, who's this man  
Exuding much good will? Why, it's our friend  
Benvolio, of course, bound by his name.  
Again, in *Twelfth Night*, who's the luckless dupe  
Obliged to sound malign? Malvolio,

Tied by nomenclature with unseen bonds:  
'Ill-will': his birthright that he'll never see.

Iago: he's Italian; so (a 'James')  
Mere 'Giacomo' should be his Christian name.  
But no, 'Iago' rules him. We know why.  
The patron saint of Spain is Santiago –  
Saint James – his surname, *Matamoros*: yes,  
The Slayer of the Moors. Forced by his name,  
Iago has no choice but kill his Moor.  
He hunts for motives but can only speak  
Mere pretexts, some concocted for the nonce;  
But rankling prejudice against the black,  
That comes as close as he can ever come  
To uttering his baptismal servitude,  
Coercion by a name imposed from far.

But then, could Jimmy *Wait* declare to us,  
By homonym, he made *Narcissus* slow,  
Obliging it to tarry; and, what's more,  
His homophone condemned the ship to lag,  
Dragged by his weight? Of course not; for he's doomed  
(And dooms), like other characters, by his name:  
That onomastic law he'll never know.  
Yes, it can kill: lament Hippolytus,  
His horses bound to smash him on the rocks.

Nomenclature apes blindfold Destiny.

## Romantic Slaves

Romantic slaves, some English poets now:  
They dig  
With pause-dilated sensitivity  
And hesitant velleity  
The rich clay-gooey soil; they hear the ruck  
Of crickets, see the soft fall of the light  
At dawn, and note the beetles reading Braille.  
These poets, to woo obscurity, omit  
Much punctuation  
                                and  
  cut  
  gaps  
                                in sense  
To seem profound and give employment to  
Interpreters who feed on the arcane.



Heads buried in mild grasses, they ignore:  
The scribbled doors of long-closed high-street shops,  
The plastic bags and polystyrene cups  
That roll in mucky gutters; slimy crap  
Of dogs, and white gull-lime on spattered shore;  
The fat and ugly folk who multiply,  
Displaying dark tattoos that stain their arms  
And legs and anywhere. Yes, our streets breed  
Such ugliness, the squalid and the gross.  
You want to hide from this, or just forget?  
Then try our English poets' gossamer  
(No, not the Durex brand) and breathe, breathe deep,  
Their most refined of rarest atmospheres.

But don't surrender to those other tropes.  
Shun the romantic fiction of our hell,  
The urban hell ('I had not thought death had  
Undone so many'); when, if the truth be told,  
There lives a mix of mess and dignity,  
Of shit and pride. We, in the city, see  
Some people of good will, of aid and grace;  
The scrubbed white portico that braves the day;  
In this pushchair, an infant's questioning face.

**Charles Baudelaire:**

**Omens**

To raise a weight so heavy, Sisyphus,  
I need your courage! Though I have a heart  
For the work, art's long, and time is all too short.

Far from illustrious tombs, that heart,  
A muffled drum, beats a funereal march  
Towards some solitary cemetery.

– Many a gem is bound to sleep in the dark  
And in oblivion, far from picks and plumb-lines.

Many a flower, alas, just spills its scent:  
Sweet secret of the deepest solitude.

---